BEN BLAIR

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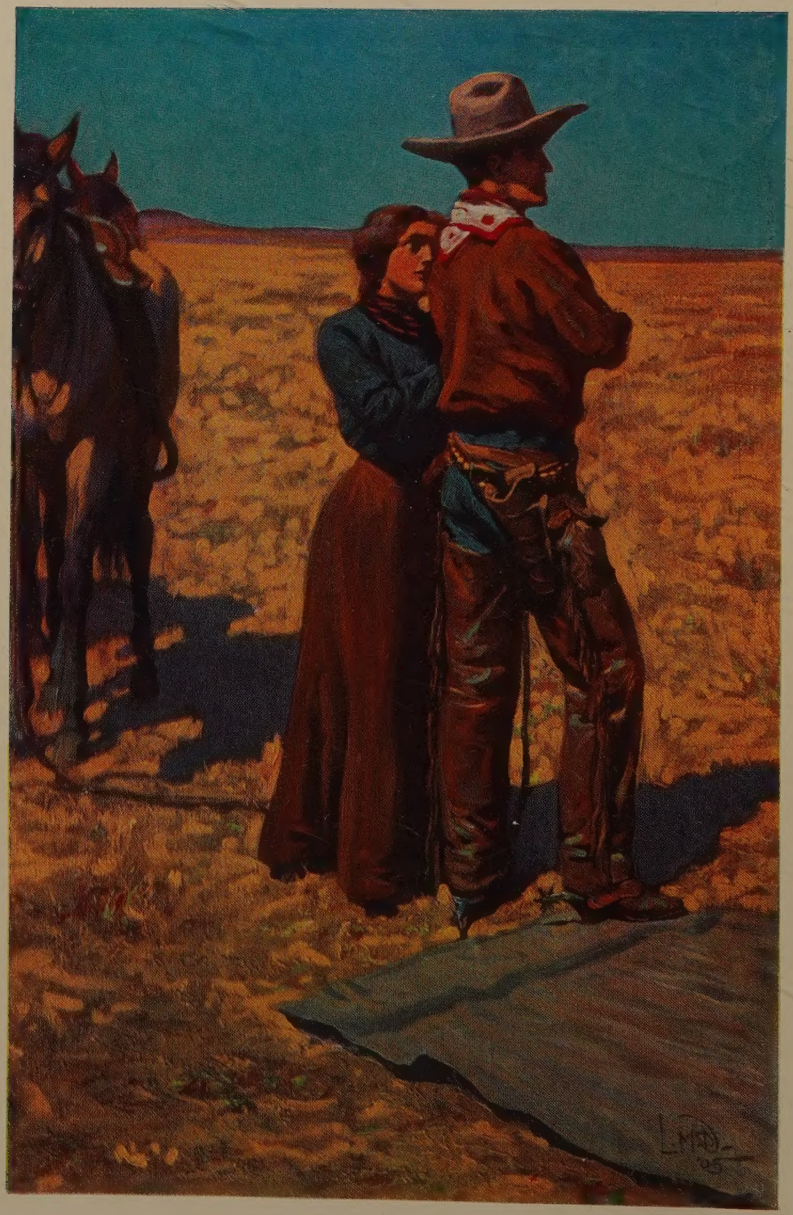

"BEN, FORGIVE ME. I'VE HURT YOU."

[Page 114.]

Ben Blair

THE STORY OF A PLAINSMAN

BY

Will Lillibridge

WITH FRONTISPIECE IN FULL COLOR

BY

Maynard Dixon

FOURTH EDITION

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To My Wife

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CHAPTER I

IN RUDE BORDER-LAND

EVEN in a community where unsavory reputations were the rule, Mick Kennedy's saloon was of evil repute. In a land new and wild, his establishment was the wildest, partook most of the unsubdued, unevolved character of its surroundings. There, as irresistibly as gravitation calls the falling apple, came from afar and near — mainly from afar — the malcontent, the restless, the reckless, seeking — instinctively gregarious — the crowd, the excitement of the green-covered table, the temporary oblivion following the gulping of fiery red liquor.

Great splendid animals were the men who gathered there; hairy, powerful, strong-voiced from combat with prairie wind and frontier distance; devoid of a superfluous ounce of flesh, their trousers, uniformly baggy at the knees, bearing mute testimony to the many hours spent in the saddle; the bare unprotected skin of their hands and faces speaking likewise of constant contact with sun and storm.

By the broad glow of daylight the place was anything but inviting. The heavy bar, made of cottonwood, had

no more elegance than the rude sod shanty of the pioneer. The worn round cloth-topped tables, imported at extravagant cost from the East, were covered with splashes of grease and liquor; and the few fly-marked pictures on the walls were coarsely suggestive. Scattered among them haphazard, in one instance through a lithographic print, were round holes as large as a spike-head, through which, by closely applying the eye, one could view the world without. When the place was new, similar openings had been carefully refilled with a whittled stick of wood, but the practice had been discontinued; it was too much trouble, and also useless from the frequency with which new holes were made. Besides, although accepted with unconcern by *habitués* of the place, they were a source of never-ending interest to the "tenderfeet" who occasionally appeared from nowhere and disappeared whence they had come.

But at night all was different. Encircling the room with gleaming points of light were a multitude of blazing candles, home-made from tallow of prairie cattle. The irradiance, almost as strong as daylight, but radically different, softened all surrounding objects. The prairie dust, penetrating with the wind, spread itself everywhere. The reflection from cheap glassware, carefully polished, made it appear of costly make; the sawdust of the floor seemed a downy covering; the crude heavy chairs, an imitation of the artistic furniture of our fathers. Even the face of bartender Mick, with its stiff unshaven red beard and its single eye, — merciless as an electric headlight, — its broad flaming scar leading down from the

blank socket of its mate, became less repulsive under the softened light.

With the coming of Fall frosts, the premonition of Winter, the frequenters of the place gathered earlier, remained later, emptied more of the showily labelled bottles behind the bar, and augmented when possible their well-established reputation for recklessness. About the soiled tables the fringe of bleared faces and keen hawk-like eyes was more closely drawn. The dull rattle of poker-chips lasted longer, frequently far into the night, and even after the tardy light of morning had come to the rescue of the sputtering stumps in the candlesticks.

On such a morning, early in November, daylight broadened upon a characteristic scene. Only one table was in use, and around it sat four men. One by one the other players had cashed out and left the game. One of them was snoring in a corner, his head resting upon the sawdust. Another leaned heavily upon the bar, a half-drained glass before him. Even the four at the table were not as upon the night before. The hands which held the greasy cards and toyed with the stacks of chips were steady, but the heads controlling them wavered uncertainly; and the hawk eyes were bloodshot.

A man with a full beard, roughly trimmed into the travesty of a Vandyke, was dealing. He tossed out the cards, carefully inclining their faces downward, and returned the remainder of the pack softly to the table.

"Pass, damn it!" growled the man at the left.

"Pass," came from the next man.

"Pass," echoed the last of the quartette.

Five blue chips dropped in a row upon the cloth.

"I open it."

The dealer took up the pack lovingly.

"Cards?"

The man at the left, tall, gaunt, ill-kempt, flicked the pasteboards in his hand to the floor and ground them beneath his heavy boots.

"Give me five."

The point of the Vandyke beard was aimed straight past the speaker.

"Cards?" repeated the dealer.

"Five! Can't you hear?"

The man braced against the bar looked around with interest. In the mask of Mick Kennedy the single eye closed almost imperceptibly. Slowly the face of the dealer turned.

"I can hear you pretty well when you cash into the game. You already owe me forty blues, Blair."

The long figure stiffened, the face went pale.

"You — mean — you —" the tongue was very thick. "You cut me out?"

For a moment there was silence; then once more the beard pointed to the player next beyond.

"Cards?" for the third time.

Five chips ranged in a row beside their predecessors.

"Three."

A hand, almost the hand of a gentleman, went instinctively to the gaunt throat of the ignored gambler and jerked at the close flannel shirt; then without a word the owner got unsteadily to his feet and followed

an irregular trail toward the interested spectator at the bar.

"Have a drink with me, pard," said the gambler, as he regarded the immovable Mick. "Two whiskeys, there!"

Kennedy did not stir, and for five seconds Blair blinked his dulled eyes in wordless surprise; then his fist came down upon the cottonwood board with a mighty crash.

"Wake up there, Mick!" he roared. "I'm speaking to you! A couple of 'ryes' for the gentleman here and myself."

Another pause, momentary but effective.

"I heard you." The barkeeper spoke quietly but without the slightest change of expression, even of the eye. "I heard you, but I'm not dealing out drinks to deadbeats. Pay up, and I'll be glad to serve you."

Swift as thought Blair's hand went to his hip, and the rattle of poker-chips sympathetically ceased. A second, and a big revolver was trained fair at the dispenser of liquors.

"Curse you, Mick Kennedy!" muttered a choking voice, "when I order drinks I want drinks. Dig up there, and be lively!"

The man by the speaker's side, surprised out of his intoxication, edged away to a discreet distance; but even yet the Irishman made no move. Only the single headlight shifted in its socket until it looked unblinkingly into the blazing eyes of the gambler.

"Tom Blair," commanded an even voice, "Tom Blair, you white-livered bully, put up that gun!"

Slowly, very slowly, the speaker turned, — all but the

terrible Cyclopean eye, — and moved forward until his body leaned upon the bar, his face protruding over it.

"Put up that gun, I tell you!" A smile almost fiendish broke over the furrows of the rugged face. "You would n't dast shoot, unless perhaps it was a woman, you coward!"

For a fraction of a minute there was silence, while over the visage of the challenged there flashed, faded, recurred the expression we pay good dollars to watch playing upon the features of an accomplished actor; then the yellow streak beneath the bravado showed, and the menacing hand dropped to the holster at the hip. Once again Kennedy, who seldom made a mistake, had sized his man correctly.

"What do I owe you altogether, Mick?" asked a changed and subdued voice. "Make it as easy as you can."

Kennedy relaxed into his lounging position.

"Thirty-five dollars. We'll call it thirty. You've been setting them up to everybody here for a week on your face."

"Can't you give me just a little more credit, Mick?" An expression meant to be a smile formed upon the haggard face. "Just for old time's sake? You know I've always been a good customer of yours, Kennedy."

"Not a cent."

"But I've got to have liquor!" One hand, ill-kept, but long of fingers and refined of shape, steadied the speaker. "I can't get along without it!"

"Sell something, then, and pay up."

The man thought a moment and shook his head.

"I have n't anything to sell; you know that. It 's the wrong time of the year." He paused, and the travesty of a smile reappeared. "Next Winter —"

"You 've got a horse outside."

For an instant Blair's gaunt face darkened at the insult; he grew almost dignified; but the drink curse had too strong a grip upon him and the odor of whiskey was in the air.

"Yes, I 've a good horse," he said slowly. "What 'll you give for him?"

"Seventy dollars."

"He 's a good horse, worth a hundred."

"I 'm glad of that, but I 'm not dealing in horses. I make the offer just to oblige you. Besides, as you said, it 's an off season."

"You won't give me more?"

"No."

Blair looked impotently about the room, but his former companions had returned to their game. Filling in the silence, the dull clatter of chips mingled with the drunken snores of the man on the floor.

"Very well, give me forty," he said at last.

"You accept, do you?"

"Yes."

"All right."

Blair waited a moment. "Are n't you going to give me what 's coming?" he asked.

Slowly the single eye fixed him as before.

"I did n't know you had anything coming."

"Why, you just said forty dollars!"

There was no relenting in Kennedy's face.

"You owe that gentleman over there at the table for forty blues. I'll settle with him."

Instinctively, as before, Blair's thin hand went to his throat, clutching at the coarse flannel. He saw he was beaten.

"Well, give me a drink, anyway!"

Silently Mick took a big flask from the shelf and set it with a decanter upon the bar. Filling the glass, Blair drained it at a gulp, refilled and drained it — and then again.

"A little drop to take along with me," he whined.

Kennedy selected a pint bottle, filled it from the big flask, and silently proffered it over the board.

Blair took the extended favor, glanced once more about the room, and stumbled toward the exit. Mick busied himself wiping the soiled bar with a towel, if possible, even more filthy. At the threshold, his hand upon the knob, Blair paused, stiffened, grew livid in the face.

"May Satan blister your scoundrel souls, all of you!" he cursed.

Not a man within sound of his voice gave sign that he had heard, as the opened door returned to its casing with a crash.

CHAPTER II

DESOLATION

TEN miles out on the prairies, — not lands plane as a table, as they are usually pictured, but rolling like the sea with waves of tremendous amplitude — stood a rough shack, called by courtesy a house. Like many a more pretentious domicile, it was of composite construction, although consisting of but one room. At the base was the native prairie sod, piled tier upon tier. Above this the superstructure, like the bar of Mick Kennedy's resort, was of warping cottonwood. Built out from this single room and forming a part of it was what the designer had called a woodshed; but as no tree the size of a man's wrist was within ten miles, or a railroad within fifty, the term was manifestly a misnomer. Wood in any form it had never contained; instead, it was filled with that providential fuel of the frontiersman, found superabundantly upon the ranges, — buffalo chips.

From the main room there was another and much smaller opening into the sod foundation, and below it, — a dog-kennel. Slightly apart from the shack stood a twin structure even less assuming, its walls and roof being wholly built of sod. It was likewise without partition, and was used as a barn. Hard by was a corral

covering perhaps two acres, enclosed with a barbed-wire fence. These three excrescences upon the face of nature comprised the "improvements" of the "Big B Ranch."

Within the house the furnishings accorded with their surroundings. Two folding bunks, similar in conception to the upper berths of a Pullman car, were built end to end against the wall; when they were raised to give room, four supports dangled beneath like paralyzed arms. A home-made table, suggesting those scattered about country picnic grounds, a few cheap chairs, a row of chests and cupboards variously remodelled from a common foundation of dry-goods boxes, and a stove, ingeniously evolved out of the cylinder and head of a portable engine, comprised the furniture.

The morning sunlight which dimmed the candles of Mick Kennedy's saloon drifted through the single high-set window of the Big B Ranch-house, revealing there a very different scene. From beneath the quilts in one of the folding bunks appeared the faces of a woman and a little boy. At the opening of the dog-kennel the head of a mottled yellow-and-white mongrel dog projected into the room, the sensitive muzzle pointing directly at the occupied bunk. The eyes of woman, child, and beast were open and moved restlessly about.

"Mamma," and the small boy wriggled beneath the clothes, "Mamma, I'm hungry."

The white face of the woman turned away, more pallid than before. An unfamiliar observer would have been at a loss to guess the age of the owner. In that haggard,

non-committal countenance there was nothing to indicate whether she was twenty-five or forty.

"It is early yet, son. Go to sleep."

The boy closed his eyes dutifully, and for perhaps five minutes there was silence; then the blue orbs opened wider than before.

"Mamma, I can't go to sleep. I'm hungry!"

"Never mind, Benjamin. The horses, the rabbits, the birds, — all get hungry sometimes." A hacking cough interrupted her words. "Snuggle close up to me, little son, and keep warm."

"But, mamma, I want something to eat. Won't you get it for me?"

"I can't, son."

He waited a moment. "Won't you let me help myself, then, mamma?"

The eyes of the mother moistened.

"Mamma," the child repeated, gently shaking his mother's shoulder, "won't you let me help myself?"

"There's nothing for you to eat, sonny, nothing at all."

The blue child-eyes widened; the serious little face puckered.

"Why ain't there anything to eat, mamma?"

"Because there is n't, bubby."

The reasoning was conclusive, and the child accepted it without further parley; but soon another interrogation took form in his active brain.

"It's cold, mamma," he announced. "Are n't you going to build a fire?"

Again the mother coughed, and a flush of red appeared upon her cheeks.

"No," she answered with a sigh.

"Why not, mamma?"

There was not the slightest trace of irritation in the answering voice, although it was clearly an effort to speak.

"I can't get up this morning, little one."

Mysteries were multiplying, but the small Benjamin was equal to the occasion. With a spring he was out of bed, and in another moment was stepping gingerly upon the cold bare floor.

"I'm going to build a fire for you, mamma," he announced.

The homely mongrel whined a welcome to the little lad's appearance, and with his tail beat a friendly tattoo upon the kennel floor; but the woman spoke no word. With impassive face she watched the shivering little figure as it hurried into its clothes, and then, with celerity born of experience, went about the making of a fire. Suddenly a hitherto unthought-of possibility flashed into the boy's mind, and leaving his work he came back to the bunk.

"Are you sick, mamma?" he asked.

Instantly the woman's face softened.

"Yes, laddie," she answered gently.

Carefully as a nurse, the small protector replaced the cover at his mother's back, where his exit had left a gap; then returned to his work.

"You must have it warm here," he said.

Not until the fire in the old cylinder makeshift was burning merrily did he return to his patient; then, stand-

ing straight before her, he looked down with an air of childish dignity that would have been comical had it been less pathetic.

"Are you very sick, mamma?" he said at last, hesitatingly.

"I am dying, little son." She spoke calmly and impersonally, without even a quickening of the breath. The thin hand, lying on the tattered cover, did not stir.

"Mamma!" the old-man face of the boy tightened, as, bending over the bed, he pressed his warm cheek against hers, now growing cold and white.

At the mouth of the kennel two bright eyes were watching curiously. Their owner wriggled the tip of his muzzle inquiringly, but the action brought no response. Then the muzzle went into the air, and a whine, long-drawn and insistent, broke the silence.

The boy rose. There was not a trace of moisture in his eyes, but the uncannily aged face seemed older than before. He went over to a peg where his clothes were hanging and took down the frayed garment that answered as an overcoat. From the bunk there came another cough, quickly muffled; but he did not turn. Cap followed coat, mittens cap; then, suddenly remembering, he turned to the stove and scattered fresh chips upon the glowing embers.

"Good-bye, mamma," said the boy.

The mother had been watching him, although she gave no sign. "Where are you going, sonny?" she asked.

"To town, mamma. Someone ought to know you're sick."

There was a moment's pause, wherein the mongrel whined impatiently.

"Are n't you going to kiss me first, Benjamin?"

The little lad retraced his steps, until, bending over, his lips touched those of his mother. As he did so, the hand which had lain upon the coverlet shifted to his arm detainingly.

"How were you thinking of going, son?"

A look of surprise crept into the boy's blue eyes. A question like this, with its obvious answer, was unusual from his matter-of-fact mother. He glanced at her gravely.

"I 'm going afoot, mamma."

"It 's ten miles to town, Benjamin."

"But you and I walked it once together. Don't you remember?"

An expression the lad did not understand flashed over the white face of Jennie Blair. Well she remembered that other occasion, one of many like the present, when she and the little lad had gone in company to the settlement of which Mick Kennedy's place was a part, in search of someone whom after ten hours' delay they had succeeded in bringing home, — the remnant and vestige of what was once a man.

"Yes, I know we did, Bennie."

The boy waited a moment longer, then straightened himself.

"I think I 'd better be starting now."

But instead of loosening its hold, the hand upon the boy's shoulder tightened. The eyes of the two met.

"You're not going, sonny. I'm glad you thought of it, but I can't let you go."

Again there was silence for so long that the waiting dog, impatient of the delay, whined in soft protest.

"Why not, mamma?"

"Because, Benjamin, it's too late now. Besides, there wouldn't be a person there who would come out to help me."

The boy's look of perplexity returned.

"Not if they knew you were very sick, mamma?"

"Not if they knew I was dying, my son."

The boy took off hat, mittens, and coat, and returned them to their places. Never in his short life had he questioned a statement of his mother's, and such heresy did not occur to him now. Coming back to the bunk, he laid his cheek caressingly beside hers.

"Is there anything I can do for you, mamma?" he whispered.

"Nothing but what you are doing now, laddie."

Tired of standing, the mongrel dropped within his tracks flat upon his belly, and, his head resting upon his fore-paws, lay watching intently.

When the door of Mick Kennedy's saloon closed with an emphasis that shook the very walls, it shut out a being more ferocious, more evil, than any beast of the jungle. For the time, Blair's alcohol-saturated brain evolved but one chain of thought, was capable of but one emotion — hate. Every object in the universe, from its Creator to himself, fell under the ban. The language of hate is

curses; and as he moved out over the prairie there dripped from his lips continuously, monotonously, a trickling, blighting stream of malediction. Swaying, stumbling, unconscious of his physical motions, instinct kept him upon the trail; a Providence, sometimes kindest to those least worthy, preserved him from injury.

Half way out he met a solitary Indian astride a faded-looking mustang, and the current of his wrath was temporarily diverted by a surly "How!" Even this measure of friendliness was regretted when the big revolver came out of the rancher's holster like a flash, and, head low on the neck of the mustang, heels in the little beast's ribs, the aborigine retreated with a yell, amid a shower of ill-aimed bullets. Long after the figure on the pony had passed out of range, Blair stood pulling at the trigger of the empty repeater and cursing louder than before because it would not "pop."

Two hours later, when it was past noon, an uncertain hand lifted the wooden latch of the Big B Ranch-house door, and, heralded by an inrush of cold outside air, Tom Blair, master and dictator, entered his domain. The passage of time, the physical exercise, and the prairie air, had somewhat cleared his brain. Just within the room, he paused and looked about him with surprise. With premonition of impending trouble, the mongrel bristled the yellow hair of his neck, and, retreating to the mouth of his kennel, stood guard; but otherwise the scene was to a detail as it had been in the morning. The woman lay passive within the bunk. The child by her side, holding her hand, did not turn. The very atmosphere of the place tingled with

an ominous quiet, — a silence such as one who has lived through a cyclone connects instinctively with a whirling oncoming black funnel.

The new-comer was first to make a move. Walking over to the centre of the room, he stopped and looked upon his subjects.

"Well, of all the infernally lazy people I ever saw!" he commented, "you beat them, Jennie! Get up and cook something to eat; it's way after noon, and I'm hungry."

The woman said nothing, but the boy slid to his feet, facing the intruder.

"Mamma's sick and can't get up," he explained as impersonally as to a stranger. "Besides, there isn't anything to cook. She said so."

The man's brow contracted into a frown.

"Speak when you're spoken to, young upstart!" he snapped. "Out with you, Jennie! I don't want to be monkeyed with to-day!"

He hung up his coat and cap, and loosened his belt a hole; but no one else in the room moved.

"Didn't you hear me?" he asked, looking warningly toward the bunk.

"Yes," she replied.

Autocrat under his own roof, the man paused in surprise. Never before had a command here been disobeyed. He could scarcely believe his own senses.

"You know what to do, then," he said sharply.

For the first time a touch of color came into the woman's cheeks, and catching the man's eyes she looked into them unfalteringly.

"Since when did I become your slave, Tom Blair?" she asked slowly.

The words were a challenge, the tone was that of some wild thing, wounded, cornered, staring death in the face, but defiant to the end. "Since when did you become my owner, body and soul?"

Any sportsman, any being with a fragment of admiration for even animal courage, would have held aloof then. It remained for this man, bred amid high civilization, who had spent years within college halls, to strike the prostrate. As in the frontier saloon, so now his hand went involuntarily to his throat, clutched at the binding collar until the button flew; then, as before, his face went white.

"Since when!" he blazed, "since when! I admire your nerve to ask that question of me! Since six years ago, when you first began living with me. Since the day when you and the boy, — and not a preacher within a hundred miles —" Words, a flood of words, were upon his lips; but suddenly he stopped. Despite the alcohol still in his brain, despite the effort he made to continue, the gaze of the woman compelled silence.

"You dare recall that memory, Tom Blair?" The words came more slowly than before, and with an intensity that burned them into the hearer's memory. "You dare, knowing what I gave up for your sake!" The eyes blazed afresh, the dark head was raised on the pillows. "You know that my son stands listening, and yet you dare throw my coming to you in my face?"

White to the lips went the scarred visage of the man, but the madness was upon him.

"I dare?" To his own ears the voice sounded unnatural. "I dare? To be sure I dare! You came to me of your own free-will. You were not a child!" His voice rose and the flush returned to his face. "You knew the price and accepted it deliberately, — deliberately, I say!"

Without a sound, the figure in the rough bunk quivered and stiffened; the hand upon the coverlet was clenched until the nails grew white, then it relaxed. Slowly, very slowly, the eyelids closed as though in sleep.

Impassive but intent listener, an instinct now sent the boy Benjamin back to his post.

"Mamma," he said gently. "Mamma!"

There was no answer, nor even a responsive pressure of the hand.

"Mamma!" he repeated more loudly. "Mamma! Mamma!"

Still no answer, only the limp passivity. Then suddenly, although never before in his short life had the little lad looked upon death, he recognized it now. His mamma, his playmate, his teacher, was like this; she would not speak to him, would not answer him; she would never speak to him or smile upon him again! Like a thunderclap came the realization of this. Then another thought swiftly followed. This man,— one who had said things that hurt her, that brought the red spots to her cheeks, — this man was to blame. Not in the least did he understand the meaning of what he had just heard. No human being had

suggested to him that Blair was the cause of his mother's death; but as surely as he would remember their words as long as he lived, so surely did he recognize the man's guilt. Suddenly, as powder responds to the spark, there surged through his tiny body a terrible animal hate for this man, and, scarcely realizing the action, he rushed at him.

"She 's dead and you killed her!" he screamed. "Mamma 's dead, dead!" and the little doubled fists struck at the man's legs again and again.

Oblivious to the onslaught, Tom Blair strode over to the bunk.

"Jennie," he said, not unkindly, "Jennie, what 's the matter?"

Again there was no response, and a shade of awe crept into the man's voice.

"Jennie! Jennie! Answer me!" A hand fell upon the woman's shoulder and shook it, first gently, then roughly. "Answer me, I say!"

With the motion, the head of the dead shifted upon the pillow and turned toward the man, and involuntarily he loosened his grasp. He had not eaten for twenty-four hours, and in sudden weakness he made his way to one of the rough chairs, and sat down, his face buried in his hands.

Behind him the boy Benjamin, his sudden hot passion over, stood watching intently, — his face almost uncanny in its lack of childishness.

For a time there was absolute silence, the hush of a death-chamber; then of a sudden the boy was conscious

that the man was looking at him in a way he had never looked before. Deep down below our consciousness, far beneath the veneer of civilization, there is an instinct, relic of the vigilant savage days, that warns us of personal danger. By this instinct the lad now interpreted the other's gaze, and knew that it meant ill for him. For some reason which he could not understand, this man, this big animal, was his mortal enemy; and, in the manner of smaller animals, he began to consider an avenue of escape.

"Ben," spoke the man, "come here!"

Tom Blair was sober now, and wore a look of determination upon his face that few had ever seen there before; but to his surprise the boy did not respond. He waited a moment, and then said sharply:

"Ben, I 'm speaking to you. Come here at once!"

For answer there was a tightening of the lad's blue eyes and an added watchfulness in the incongruously long childish figure; but that was all.

Another lagging minute passed, wherein the two regarded each other steadily. The man's eyes dropped first.

"You little devil!" he muttered, and the passion began showing in his voice. "I believe you knew what I was thinking all the time! Anyway, you 'll know now. You said awhile ago that I was to blame for your mother being — as she is. You 're liable to say that again." A horror greater than sudden passion was in the deliberate explanation and in the slow way he rose to his feet. "I 'm going to fix you so you can't say it again, you old-man imp!"

Then a peculiar thing happened. Instead of running

away, the boy took a step forward, and the man paused, scarcely believing his eyes. Another step forward, and yet another, came the diminutive figure, until almost within the aggressor's reach ; then suddenly, quick as a cat, it veered, dropped upon all fours to the floor, and head first, scrambling like a rabbit, disappeared into the open mouth of the dog-kennel.

Too late the man saw the trick, and curses came to his lips, — curses fit for a fiend, fit for the irresponsible being he was. He himself had built that kennel. It extended in a curve eight feet into the solid sod foundation, and to get at the spot where the boy now lay he would have to tear down the house itself. The temper which had made the man what he now was, a drunkard and fugitive in a frontier country, took possession of him wholly, and with it came a madman's cunning ; for at a sudden thought he stopped, and the cursing tongue was silent. Five minutes later he left the place, closing the door carefully behind him ; but before that time a red jet of flame, like the ravenous tongue of a famished beast, was lapping at a hastily assembled pile of tinder-dry furniture in one corner of the shanty.

CHAPTER III

THE [R RANCH

MR. RANKIN moved back from a well-discussed table, and, the room being conveniently small, tilted his chair back against the wall. The protesting creak of the ill-glued joints under the strain of his ponderous figure was a signal for all the diners, and five other men likewise drew away from around the board. Rankin extracted a match and a stout jack-knife from the miscellaneous collection of useful articles in his capacious pocket, carefully whittled the bit of wood to a point, and picked his teeth deliberately. The five "hands," sunbrowned, unshaven, dissimilar in face as in dress, waited in expectation; but the housekeeper, a shapeless, stolid-looking woman, wife of the foreman, Graham, went methodically about the work of clearing the table. Rankin watched her a moment indifferently; then without turning his head, his eyes shifted in their narrow slits of sockets until they rested upon one of the cowboys.

"What time was it you saw that smoke, Grannis?" he asked.

The man addressed paused in the operation of rolling a cigarette.

"'Bout an hour ago, I should say. I was just thinking of coming in to dinner."

The lids met over Rankin's eyes, then the narrow slit opened.

"It was in the no'thwest you say, and seemed to be quite a way off?"

Grannis nodded.

"Yes; I could n't make out any fire, only the smoke, and that did n't last long. I thought at first maybe it was a prairie fire, and started to see; but it was getting thinner before I 'd gone a mile, so I turned round and by the time I got back to the corral there was n't nothing at all to see."

Two of the other hands solemnly exchanged a wink.

"Think you must have eaten too many of Ma Graham's pancakes this morning, and had a blur over your eyes," commented one, slyly. "Prairie fires don't stop that sudden when the grass is like it is now."

The portly housewife paused in her work to cast a look of scorn upon the speaker, but Grannis rushed into the breach.

"Don't you believe it. There was a fire all right. Somebody stopped it, or it stopped itself, that 's all."

Tilting his chair forward with an effort, Rankin got to his feet, and, as usual, his action brought the discussion to an end. The woman returned to her work; the men put on hats and coats preparatory to going out of doors. Only the proprietor stood passive a moment absently drawing down his vest over his portly figure.

"Graham," he said at last, "hitch the mustangs to the light wagon."

"All right."

"And, Graham —"

The man addressed paused.

"Throw in a couple of extra blankets."

"All right."

Out of doors the men took up the conversation where they had left off.

"You better begin to hope the old man finds something that 's been afire up there, Grannis," said the joker of the house. "If he don't, you 've cooked your goose proper."

Grannis was a new-comer, and looked his surprise.

"Why so?" he asked.

"You 'll find out why," retorted the other. "Fire here 's 'most as uncommon as rain, and the boss don't like them smoky jokes."

"But I saw smoke, I tell you," reiterated Grannis, defensively; "smoke, dead sure!"

"All right, if you 're certain sure."

"Marcom knows what he 's talking about, Grannis," said Graham. "He tried to ginger things up a bit when he was new here, like you are; found a litter of coyotes one September — thought they were timber wolves, I guess, and braced up with his story to the old man." The speaker paused with a reflective grin.

"Well, what happened?" asked Grannis.

"What happened? The boss sent me dusting about forty miles to get some hounds. Nearly spoiled a good team to get back inside sixteen hours, and — they found out Bill here in the next thirty minutes, that was all!" Once more the story ended in a grin.

"What 'd Rankin say?" asked Grannis, with interest.

"How about it, Bill?" suggested Graham.

The big cowboy looked a trifle foolish.

"Oh, he did n't say much; 't ain't his way. He just remarked, sort of off-hand, that as far as I was concerned the next year had only about four pay-months in it. That was all."

Whatever is worth doing at all, is worth doing at once. This was the motto of the master of the ⌊R Ranch. In ten minutes' time Rankin's big shapeless figure, seated in the old buckboard, was moving northwest at the steady jog-trot typical of prairie travel, and which as the hours pass by annihilates distance surprisingly. Simply a fat, an abnormally fat, man, the casual observer would have said. It remained for those who came in actual contact with him to learn the force beneath the forbidding exterior, — the relentless bull-dog energy that had made him dictator of the great ranch, and kept subordinate the restless, roving, dissolute men-of-fortune he employed, — the deliberate and impartial judgment which had made his word as near law as it was possible for any mandate to be among the motley inhabitants within a radius of fifty miles. Had Rankin chosen he could have attained honor, position, power in his native Eastern home. No barrier built of convention or of conservatism could have withstood him. Society reserves her prizes largely for the man of initiative; and, uncomely block as he was, Rankin was of the true type. But for some reason, a reason known to none of his associates, he had chosen to come to the

West. Some consideration or other had caused him to stop at his present abode, and had made him apparently a fixture in the midst of this unconquered country.

There was no road in the direction Rankin was travelling, — only the unbroken prairie sod, eaten close by the herds that grazed its every foot. Even under the direct sunlight the air was sharp. The regular breath of the mustangs shot out like puffs of steam from the exhaust of an engine, and the moisture frosted about their flanks and nostrils. But the big man on the seat did not notice temperature. He had produced a pipe from the depths beneath the wagon seat, and tobacco from a jar cunningly fitted into one corner of the box, both without moving from his place, the seat being hinged and divided in the centre to facilitate the operation. More a home to him than the ranch-house itself was that battered buckboard. Here, on an average, he spent eight hours out of the twenty-four, and that seat-box was a veritable storehouse of articles used in his daily life. As the jog-trot measured off the miles he replenished the pipe again and again, leaving behind him the odor of strong tobacco.

Not until he was within a mile of the "Big B" property, and a rise in the monotonous roll of the land brought him in range of vision, did Rankin show that he felt more than ordinary interest in his expedition; then, shading his eyes, he looked steadily ahead. The sod barn stood in its usual place; the corral, with its posts set close together, stretched by its side; but where the house had stood there could not be distinguished even a mound. The hand on the reins tightened meaningly, and in sympa-

thy the mustangs moved ahead at a swifter pace, leaving behind a trail of tobacco-smoke denser than before.

When the little Benjamin Blair, fugitive, had literally taken to the earth, it was with definite knowledge of the territory he was entering. He had often explored its depths with childish curiosity, to the distress of his mother and the disgust of the rightful owner, the mongrel dog. Retreating to the farther end of the cave, the instinct of self-preservation set hands and feet to work like the claws of a gopher, filling with loose dirt the narrow passage through which he had entered. Panting and perspiring with the effort, choked with the dust he raised, all but suffocated, he dug until his strength gave out; then, curling up in his narrow quarters, he lay listening. At first he heard nothing, not even a sound from the dog; and he wondered at the fact. He could not believe that Tom Blair would leave him in peace, and he breathlessly awaited the first tap of an instrument against his retreat. A minute passed, lengthened to five — to ten — and with the quick impatience of childhood he started to learn the reason of the delay. His active little body revolved in its nest. In the darkness a wiry arm scratched at the recently erected barricade. A head with a tousled mass of hair poked its way into the opening, crowded forward a foot — two feet, then stopped, the whole body quivering. He had passed the curve, and of a sudden it was as though he had opened the door of a furnace and gazed inside. Instead of the familiar room, a great sheet of flame walled him in. Instead of silence, a roar as of a hurricane was

in his ears. Never in his life had he seen a great fire, but instantly he understood. Instantly the instinctive animal terror of fire gripped him; he retreated to the very depths of the kennel, and burying his small head in his arms lay still. But not even then, child though he was, did he utter a cry. The endurance which had made Jennie Blair stare death impassively in the face was part and parcel of his nature.

For the space of perhaps a minute Ben lay motionless. Louder than before came to his ears the roar of the fire. Occasionally a hot tongue of flame intruded mockingly into the mouth of his retreat. The confined air about him grew close, narcotic. He expected to die, and with the premonition of death an abnormal activity came to the child-brain. Whatever knowledge he possessed of death was connected with his mother. It was she who had given him his vague impression of another life. She herself, as she lay silent and unresponsive, had been the first concrete example of it. Inevitably thought of her came to him now, — practical, material thought, crowding from his brain the blind terror that had been its predecessor. Where was his mother now? He pictured again the furnace into which he had gazed from the mouth of the kennel. Though perhaps she would not feel it, she would be burned — burned to a crisp — destroyed like the fuel he had tossed into the makeshift stove! Instinctively he felt the sacrilege, and the desire to do something to prevent it. Something — yes, but what? He was himself helpless; he must seek outside aid — but where? Suddenly there occurred to the child-mind a suggestion appli-

cable to his difficulty, an adequate solution, for it involved everything he had learned to trust in life. He remembered a Being more powerful than man, more powerful than fire or cold, — a Being whom his mother had called God. Believing in Him, it was necessary only to ask for whatever one wished. For himself, even to save his life, he would not call upon this Being; but for his mamma! In childish faith he folded his hands and closed his eyes in the darkness.

"God," he prayed, "please put out this fire and save my mamma from burning!"

The small hands loosened and the lips parted to hear the first diminution in the growl of the flame. But it roared on.

"God!" The hands were clasped again, the voice vibrant with pleading. "God, please put out the fire! Please put it out!"

Silence again within, but without only the steady roaring crackle. Could it be possible the petition had not been heard? The childish hands met more tightly than before. The small body fairly writhed.

"God! God!" he implored for the third time. "Listen to me, please! Save my mamma, my mamma!"

For a moment the little figure lay still. Surely there would be an answer now. His mamma had said there would be, and whatever his mamma had told him had always come true. The air about him was so close he could scarcely breathe; but he did not notice it. Reversing head and feet, he started out of the kennel. It was certainly time to leave. The roar he had heard must have

been of the wind. Assuredly God had acted before this. Head first, gasping, he moved on, reached the curve, and looked out.

Indignation took possession of the little figure. The fingers clinched until the nails bit deep into the soft palms. The whole body trembled in impotent anger and outraged self-respect. Upon the face of the small man was suddenly written the implacable defiance which one sees in carnivora when wounded and cornered — intensified as an expression can only be intensified upon a human face — as, almost unconsciously, he returned to the hollow he had left, and fairly thrust his tousled head into the kindly earth.

How long he remained there he did not know. The stifling atmosphere of the place gradually overcame him. Anger, wonder, the multitude of thoughts crowding his child-brain, slowly faded away; consciousness lapsed, and he slept.

When he awoke it was with a start and a vague wonder as to his whereabouts. Then memory returned, and he listened intently. Not a sound could he distinguish save his own breathing, as he slowly made his way to the mouth of the kennel. Before him was the opposite sod wall of the house standing as high as his head; above that, the blue of the sky; upon what had been the earthen floor, a strewing of ashes; over all, calm, glorious, the slanting rays of the low afternoon sun. A moment the boy lay gazing out; then he crawled to his feet, shaking off the dirt as a dog does. One glance about, and the blue eyes halted. A moisture came into them, gathered into drops,

and then, breaking over the barrier of the long lashes, tears flowed through the accumulated grime, down the thin cheeks, leaving a clean pathway behind. That was all, for an instant; then a look — terrible in a mature person and doubly so in a child — came over the long face, — an expression partaking of both hate and vengeance. It mirrored an emotion that in a nature such as that of Benjamin Blair would never be forgotten. Some day, for some one, there would be a moment of reckoning; for the child was looking at the charred, unrecognizable corpse of his mother.

A half-hour later, Rankin, steaming into the yard of the Big B Ranch, came upon a scene that savored much of a play. It was so dramatic that the big man paused in contemplation of it. He saw there the sod and ashes of what had once been a home. The place must have burned like tinder, for now, but a few hours from the time when Grannis had first given the alarm, not an atom of smoke ascended. At one end of the quadrangular space enclosed by the walls stood the makeshift stove, discolored with the heat, as was the length of pipe by its side. Near by was a heap of warped iron and tin cooking utensils. At one side, covered by an old gunny-sack and a boy's tattered coat, was another object the form of which the observer could not distinguish.

In the middle of the plat, standing a few inches below the surface, was a small boy, and in his hands a very large spade. He wore a man's discarded shirt, with sleeves rolled up at the wrist, and neck-band pinned tight at one

side. Obviously, he had been digging, for a small pile of fresh dirt was heaped at his right. Now, however, he was motionless, the blue eyes beneath the long lashes observing the new-comer inquiringly. That was all, save that to the picture was added the background of the unbroken silence of the prairie.

The man was the first to break the spell. He got out of the wagon clumsily, walked around the wall, and entered the quadrangle by what had been the door.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Digging," replied the boy, resuming his work.

"Digging what?"

The boy lifted out a double handful of dirt upon the big spade.

"A grave."

The man glanced about again.

"For some pet?"

The boy shook his head.

"No — sir," the latter word coming as an after-thought. His mother had taught him that title of respect.

Rankin changed the line of interrogation.

"Where 's Tom Blair, young man?"

"I don't know, sir."

"Your mother, then, where is she?"

"My mother is dead."

"Dead?"

The child's blue eyes did not falter.

"I am digging her grave, sir."

For a time Rankin did not speak or stir. Amid the stubbly beard the great jaws closed, until it seemed the

pipe-stem must be broken. His eyes narrowed, as when, before starting, he had questioned the cowboy Grannis; then of a sudden he rose and laid a detaining hand upon the worker's shoulder. He understood at last.

"Stop a minute, son," he said. "I want to talk with you."

The lad looked up.

"How did it happen — the fire and your mother's death?"

No answer, only the same strangely scrutinizing look.

Rankin repeated the question a bit curtly.

Ben Blair calmly removed the man's hand from his shoulder and looked him fairly in the eyes.

"Why do you wish to know, sir?" he asked.

The big man made no answer. Why did he wish to know? What answer could he give? He paced back and forth across the narrow confines of the four sod walls. Once he paused, gazing at the little lad questioningly, not as one looks at a child but as man faces man; then, tramp, tramp, he paced on again. At last, as suddenly as before, he halted, and glanced sidewise at the uncompleted grave.

"You're quite sure you want to bury your mother here?" he asked.

The lad nodded silently.

"And alone?"

Again the nod.

"Yes, I heard her say once she wished it so."

Without comment, Rankin removed his coat and took the spade from the boy's hand.

"I'll help you, then."

For a half-hour he worked steadily, descending lower

and lower into the dry earth; then, pausing, he wiped the perspiration from his face.

"Are you cold, son?" he asked directly.

"Not very, sir." But the lad's teeth were chattering.

"A bit, though?"

"Yes, sir," simply.

"All right, you 'll find some blankets out in the wagon, Ben. You 'd better go out and get one and put it around you."

The boy started to obey. "Thank you, sir," he said.

Rankin returned to his work. In the west the sun dropped slowly beneath the horizon, leaving a wonderful golden light behind. The waiting horses, too well trained to move from their places, shifted uneasily amid much creaking of harness. Within the grave the digger's head sunk lower and lower, while the mound by the side grew higher and higher. The cold increased. Across the prairie, a multitude of black specks advanced, grew large, whizzed overhead, then retreated, their wings cutting the keen air, and silence returned.

Darkness was falling when at last Rankin clambered out to the surface.

"Another blanket, Ben, please."

Without a glance beneath, he wrapped the object under the old gunny-sack round and round with the rough wool winding-sheet, and, carrying it to the edge of the grave, himself descended clumsily and placed it gently at his feet. The pit was deep, and in getting out he slipped back twice; but he said nothing. Outside, he paused a moment, looking at the boy gravely.

"Anything you wish to say, Benjamin?"

The lad returned the gaze with equal gravity.

"I don't know of anything, sir."

The man paused a moment longer.

"Nor I, Ben," he said gently.

Again the spade resumed its work; and the impassive earth returned dully to its former resting-place. Dusk came on, but Rankin did not look about him until the mound was neatly rounded; then he turned to where he had left the little boy so bravely erect. But the small figure was not standing now; instead, it was prone on the ground amid the dust and ashes.

"Ben!" said Rankin, gently. "Ben!"

No answer.

"Ben!" he repeated.

"Yes, sir."

For a moment a small thin face appeared above the dishevelled figure, and a great sob shook the little frame. Then the head disappeared again.

"I can't help it, sir," wailed a muffled voice. "She was my mamma!"

CHAPTER IV

BEN'S NEW HOME

SUPPER was over at the LR Ranch. From the tiny lean-to the muffled rattle of heavy table-ware proclaimed the fact that Ma Graham was putting things in readiness for breakfast. Beside the sheet-iron heater in the front room, her husband, carefully swaddled in a big checked apron with the strings tied in a bow under his left ear, was busily engaged in dressing the half-dozen prairie chickens he had trapped that day. As fast as he removed the feathers he thrust them into the stove, and the pungent odor mingled with the suggestive tang of the bacon that had been the foundation of the past supper, and with the odor of cigarettes with which the other four men were permeating the place.

Graham critically held up to the light the bird upon which he had just been operating, removed a few scattered feathers, and, with practised hand, attacked its successor.

"If I were doing this job for myself," he commented, "I'd skin the beasts. Life is too blamed short to waste it in pulling out feathers!"

Grannis, the new-comer from no one knew where, smiled.

"It would look to me that you were doing it," he remarked. "I'd like to ask for information, who is if you ain't?"

The clatter of dishes suddenly ceased, and Graham's labor stopped in sympathy.

"My boy," he asked in reply, "were you ever married?"

Beneath its coat of tan, Grannis's face flushed; but he did not answer.

A second passed; then the plucking of feathers was continued.

"I reckon you've never been, though," Graham went on, "else you'd never ask that question."

During the remainder of the evening, Grannis sought no further information; and to Ma Graham's narrow life a new interest was added.

Ordinarily the cowboys went to their bunks in an adjoining shed almost directly after supper, but this evening, without giving a reason, they lingered. The housekeeper finished her work, and, coming into the main room, took a chair and sat down, her hands folded in her lap. The grouse dressed, Graham ranged them in a row upon the lean-to table, removed the apron, and lit his pipe in silence. The cowboys rolled fresh cigarettes and puffed at them steadily, the four stumps close together glowing in the dimness of the room. As everywhere upon the prairie, the quiet was almost a thing to feel.

At last, when the silence had become oppressive, the foreman took the pipe from his mouth and blew a short puff of smoke.

"Seems like the boss ought to've got back before this," he said with a sidelong glance at his wife.

Ma Graham nodded corroboration.

"Yes; must have found something wrong, I guess."

She refolded her hands, and once more relapsed into silence.

It was the breaking of the ice, however.

"Where d'ye suppose the trouble could have been, Graham?" It was another late-comer, Bud Buck, young and narrow of hips, who spoke.

"At Blair's," was the answer. "The Big B is the closest."

"Blair?" The questioner puffed at his cigarette thoughtfully. "Guess I never heard of him."

"Must be a stranger in these parts, then," said Marcom. "Most everybody knows Tom Blair." He paused to give an all-including glance. "At least well enough to get a slice of his dough," he finished with a sarcastic laugh.

"Does he handle the pasteboards?" asked Buck, with interest.

"Tries to," contemptuously.

The curiosity of the youthful Bud was now thoroughly aroused.

"What kind of a fellow is he, anyway?" he went on. "Does he go it alone up at his ranch?"

At the last question Bill Marcom, discreetly silent, shifted his eyes in the direction of the foreman, and, following them, Bud surprised a covert glance between Graham and his wife. It was the latter who finally answered.

"Not *exactly*."

Buck was not without intuition, and he shifted to safer ground.

"Got much of a herd, has he?"

Marcom rolled a fresh cigarette skilfully, and drew the string of the tobacco pouch taut with his teeth.

"He did have, one time, but I don't believe he's got many left now. There's been a bunch lost there every storm I can remember. He don't keep any punchers to look after 'em, and he's never on hand himself. The woman and the kid," with a peculiar glance at the stout housekeeper, "saved 'em part of the time, but mostly they just drifted." The speaker blew a great cloud of smoke, and the veins at his temples swelled. "It's a shame, the way he neglects his stock and lets 'em starve and freeze!"

The blood coursed hot in the veins of Bud Buck.

"Why don't somebody step in?"

There was a meaning silence, broken at last by Graham.

"We would've — with a rope — if it hadn't been for the boss. He tried to help the fellow; went over there lots of times himself — weather colder than the devil, too, and with the wind and sleet so bad you couldn't see the team ahead of you — until one time last Winter Blair came home full, and caught him there." The narrative paused, and the black pipe puffed reminiscently. "The boss never said much, but I guess they must have had quite a session. Anyway, Rankin never went again, and from the way he looked when he got back here, half froze, and the mustangs beat out, I reckon Blair never knew how close he come to a necktie party that day."

Again silence fell, and remained unbroken until Graham suddenly sprang to his feet, and with "That's him now!

I could tell that old buckboard if I was in my grave!" hurried on coat and hat and disappeared into the night. A minute more and the door through which he had passed opened slowly, and the figure of a small boy, wrapped like an Indian in a big blanket, stepped timidly inside and stood blinking in the light.

In anticipation of a very different arrival the housekeeper had risen to her feet, and now in surprise, arms akimbo, she stood looking curiously at the stranger. In this land at this time the young of every other animal native thereto was common, but a child, a white child, was a novelty indeed. Many a cow-puncher, bachelor among bachelors, could testify that it had been years since he had seen the like. But Ma Graham was not a bachelor, and in her the maternal instinct, though repressed, was strong. It was barely an instant before she was at the little lad's side, unwinding the blanket with deft hands.

"Who be you, anyway, and where'd you come from?" she exclaimed.

The child observed her gravely.

"Benjamin Blair's my name. I came with the man."

The husk was off the lad ere this, and the woman was rubbing his small hands vigorously.

"Cold, ain't you? Come right over to the fire!" herself leading the way. "And hungry — I'll bet you're hungrier than a wolf!"

The lad nodded. "Yes, ma'am."

The woman straightened up and looked down at her charge.

"Of course you are. All little boys are hungry." She

cast a challenging glance around the group of interested spectators.

"Fix the fire, one of you, while I get something hot for the kid," she said, and ambled toward the lean-to.

If the men thought to have their curiosity concerning the youngster satisfied by word of mouth, however, they were doomed to be disappointed; for when Rankin himself entered it was as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. He hung up his coat methodically, and, with the boy by his side, partook of the hastily prepared meal impassively, as was his wont. It could not have escaped him that the small Benjamin ate and ate until it seemed marvellous that one stomach could accommodate so much food; but he made no comment, and when at last the boy succumbed to a final plateful, he tilted back against the wall for his last smoke for the day. This was the usual signal of dismissal, and the hands put on their hats and filed silently out.

Without more words the foreman and his wife prepared for the night. The dishes were cleared away and piled in the lean-to. From either end of the room bunks, broad as beds, were let down from the wall, and the blankets that formed their linings were carefully smoothed out. Along the pole extending across the middle of the room, another set was drawn, dividing the room in two. Then the two disappeared with a simple "Good-night."

Rankin and the boy sat alone looking at each other. From across the blanket partition there came the muffled sound of movement, the impact of Graham's heavy boots as they dropped to the floor, and then silence.

"Better go to bed, Ben," suggested Rankin, with a nod toward the bunk.

The boy at once went through the process of disrobing, and, crawling in between the blankets, pulled them up about his chin. But the blue eyes did not close. Instead, they rested steadily upon the man's face. Rankin returned the look, and then the stubby pipe left his mouth.

"What is it, Ben?"

The boy hesitated. "Am I to — to stay with you?" he asked at last.

"Yes."

For an instant the questioner seemed satisfied; then the peculiar inquiring look returned.

"Anything else, son?"

The lad hesitated longer than before. Beneath the coverings his body moved restlessly.

"Yes, sir, I want to know why nobody would come to help my mamma if she'd sent for them. She said they would n't."

The pipe left Rankin's mouth, his great jaws closing with an audible click.

"You wish to know — what did you say, Ben?"

The boy repeated the question.

For a minute, and then another, Rankin said nothing; then he knocked the ashes from the bowl of his brier and laid it upon the table.

"Never mind now why they would n't, son." He arose heavily and drew off his coat. "You 'll find out for yourself quickly enough — too quickly, my boy. Now go to sleep."

CHAPTER V

THE EXOTICS

SOME men acquire involuntary prominence by being democratic amid aristocratic surroundings. Others, on the contrary, but with the same result, continue to live the life to which they were born, even when placed amid surroundings that make their actions all but grotesque. An example of this latter class was Scotty Baker, whose ranch, as the wild goose flies, was thirteen miles west of the ⌊R.

Scotty was a very English Englishman, with an inborn love of fine horse-flesh and a guileless nature. Some years before he had fallen into the hands of a promoter, and had bartered a goodly proportion of his worldly belongings for a horse-ranch in Dakota, to be taken possession of immediately. Long indeed was the wail which went up from his home in Sussex when the fact was made known. Neighbors were fluent in denunciation, relatives insistent in expostulation; his wife, and in sympathy their baby daughter, copious in the argument of tears; but the die was irrevocably cast. Go he would, — not from voluntary stubbornness, but because he must.

The actual departure of the Bakers was much like the sailing of Columbus. Probably not one of the friends

who saw them off for their new home expected ever to see the family again. Indians they were confident were rampant, and frantic for scalps. Should any by a miracle escape the savages, the tremendous herds of buffalo, running amuck, here and there, could not fail to trample the survivors into the dust of the prairie. By comparison, war was a benignant prospect; and sighs mingled until the sound was as the wailing of winds.

Scotty was very cheerful through it all, very encouraging even in the face of incontestibly unfavorable evidence, until, with the few remnants of civilization they had brought with them, the family arrived at the wind-beaten terminus, a hundred miles from his newly acquired property. Then for the first time he wilted.

"I 've been an ass," he admitted bitterly, as he glanced in impotent contempt at the handful of weather-stained buildings which on the map bore the name of a town; "an ass, an egregious, abominable, blethering ass!"

But, notwithstanding his lack of the practical, Scotty was made of good stuff. It was not an alternative but a necessity that faced him now, and he arose right manfully to the occasion. Despite his wife's assertion that she "never, never would go any farther into this God-forsaken country," he succeeded in getting her into a lumber-wagon and headed for what he genially termed "the interior." At last he even succeeded in making her smile at his efforts to make the disreputable mule pack-team he had secured move faster than a walk.

Once in possession of his own, however, he returned to his customary easy manner of life. It took him a very

short time to discover that he had purchased a gold brick. Horses, especially fine horses, were in no demand there; but this fact did not alter his course in the least. A horse-ranch he had bought, a horse-ranch he would run, though every man west of the Mississippi should smile. He enlarged his tiny shack to a cottage of three rooms; put in floor and ceiling, and papered the walls. Out of poles and prairie sod he fashioned a serviceable barn, and built an admirable horse paddock. Last of all he planted in his dooryard, in artistic irregularity, a wagon-load of small imported trees. The fact that within six months they all died caused him slight misgiving. He at least had done what he could to beautify the earth; that he failed was nature's fault, not his.

Once settled, he began to make acquaintances. Methodically, to the members of one ranch at a time, he sent invitations to dinner, and upon the appointed date he confronted his guests with a spectacle which made them all but doubt their identity, the like of which most of them had never even seen before. Fancy a cowboy rancher, clad in flannel and leather, welcomed by a host and hostess in complete evening dress, ushered into a room which contained a carpet and a piano, and had lace curtains at the windows; seated later at a table covered with pure linen and set with real china and cut-glass. The experience was like a dream to the visitor. Temporarily, as in a dream, the evening would pass without conscious volition upon the latter's part; and not until later, when he was at home, would the full significance of the experience assert itself, and his wonder and admiration find vent in words. Then indeed

would the fame of Scotty Baker, his wife, and little daughter, be heard in the land.

Early in his career, Scotty began to cultivate the impassive Rankin. He fairly bombarded the big rancher with courtesies and invitations. No holiday (and Scotty was an assiduous observer of holidays) was complete unless Rankin was present to help celebrate. No improvement about the ranch was definitely undertaken until Rankin had expressed a favorable opinion concerning the project. Gradually, so gradually that the big man himself did not realize the change, he fell under Scotty's influence, and more and more frequently he was to be found headed toward the cosey Baker cottage. Now, for a year or more, scarcely a Sunday had passed without one or the other of the men finding it possible to traverse the thirty miles intervening between them, to spend a few hours in each other's company.

It was in pursuance of this laudable intention that on the second morning following Ben Blair's adoption into the LR Ranch — a Sunday — the Englishman hitched a team of his best blooded trotters to the antiquated phaeton, which was the only vehicle he possessed, and started across country at a lively clip. Thus it came to pass that about two hours later, having tied his team at the barn and started for the ranch-house, the visitor saw squarely in his path upon the sunny south doorstep an object that made him pause and blink his near-sighted eyes. Under the concentration of his vision, the object resolved itself into a small boy perched like a frog upon a rock, his fingers locked across his shins, his chin upon his knees. For an instant

the Englishman hesitated. Courtesy was instinctive with him.

"Can you tell me whether Mr. Rankin is at home?" he asked.

The lad calmly disentangled himself and stood up.

"You mean the big man, sir?"

Again Scotty was guilty of a breach of etiquette. He stared.

"Certainly," he replied at last.

Ben Blair stepped out of the way.

"Yes, sir, he is."

Within the ranch-house Scotty dropped into the nearest chair.

"Tell me, Rankin," he began, "who is the newcomer, and where did you get him?" A long leg swung comfortably over its mate. "And, by the way, while you're about it, is he six or sixty? By Jove, I could n't tell!"

The host looked at his visitor quizzically.

"Ben, I suppose you mean?"

"Ben, or *Tom*, I don't know. I mean the gentleman on the front steps, the one who did n't know your name," and the Englishman related the recent conversation.

The corners of Rankin's eyes tightened into an unwonted smile as he listened, and then contracted until the corner of the large mouth drew upward in sympathy.

"I 'm not surprised, Baker," he admitted, "that you 're in doubt about Ben's age. He 's eight; but I 'd be uncertain myself if I did n't absolutely know. As to his not knowing my name — it 's just struck me that I 've never introduced myself to the little fellow."

"But how did you come to get him? This is n't a country where one sees many children roaming around."

"No," the big mouth dropped back into its normal shape; "that 's a fact. He did n't just drop in. I got him by adoption, I suppose; least ways, I asked him to come and live with me, and he accepted." The speaker turned to his companion directly. "You knew Jennie Blair, did you?"

Scotty looked interested.

"Knew of her, but never had the pleasure of an acquaintance. I always —"

"Well," interrupted Rankin impassively, "Ben 's her son. She died awhile ago, you remember, and somehow it seemed to break Blair all up. He would n't stay here any longer, and did n't want to take the kid with him, so I took the youngster in. As far as I know, the arrangement will stick."

For a minute there was silence. Scotty observed his host shrewdly, almost sceptically.

"That 's all of the story, is it?" he asked at last.

"All, as far as I know."

Scotty continued his observation a moment longer.

"But not all the kid knows, I judge."

The host made no comment, and in a distinctively absent manner the Englishman removed his glasses and cleaned the lenses upon the tail of his Sunday frock-coat.

"By the way," — Scotty returned the glasses to his nose and sprung the bows over his ears with a snap, — "what day was it that Blair left? Did it happen to be Friday?"

"Yes, Friday."

"And he does n't intend ever to return?"

"I believe not."

The visitor's eyes flashed swiftly around the room. The two men were alone.

"I think, then, I see through it." The voice was lower than before. "One of my best mares disappeared night before last, and I have n't been able to get trace of a hoof or hair since."

"What?" Rankin was interested at last.

Scotty repeated the statement, and his host eyed him a full half minute steadily.

"And you just — tell of it?" he said at last.

The Englishman shifted uneasily in his seat.

"Yes." Forgetting that he had just polished his glasses, he took them off and went through the process again.

"Yes, I may as well be honest, I 've seen a bit of these Westerners about here, and I don't really agree with their scheme of justice. They 're apt to put two and two together and make eight where you know it 's only four." For the second time he sprung the bows back over his ears. "And when they find out their beastly mistake — why — oh — it 's too late then, perhaps, for some poor devil!"

For another half minute Rankin hesitated; then he reached over and grasped the other man by the hand.

"Baker," he said, "you ain't very practical, but you 're dead square." And he shook the hand again.

Of a sudden a twinkle came into the Britisher's eyes and he tore himself loose with an effort.

"By the way," he said, "I 'd like to ask a question for

future guidance. What would you have done if you 'd been in my place?"

Rankin stiffened in his seat, and a color almost red surged beneath the tan of his cheeks; then, as suddenly as his companion had done, he smiled outright.

"I reckon I 'd have done just what you did," he admitted; and the two men laughed together.

"Seriously, though," said Scotty, after a moment, "and as long as I 've told you anyway, what ought I to do under the circumstances? Should I let Blair off, do you think?"

For a moment Rankin did not answer; then he faced his questioner directly, and Scotty knew why the big man's word was so nearly law in the community.

"Under the circumstances," he repeated, "I 'd let him go; for several reasons. First of all, he 's got such a start of you now that you could n't catch him, anyway. Then he 's a coward by nature, and it 'll be a mighty long time before he ever shows up here again. And last of all," the speaker hesitated, "last of all," he repeated slowly, "though I don't know, I believe you were right when you said the boy could tell more about it than the rest of us; and if what we suspect is true, I think by the time he comes back, if he ever does come, Ben will be old enough to take care of him." Again the speaker paused, and his great jowl settled down into his shirt-front. "If he does n't, I can't read signs when I see 'em."

For a moment the room was silent; then Scotty sprang to his feet as if a load had been taken off his mind.

"All right," said he, "we 'll forget it. And, speaking of forgetting, I 've nearly got myself into trouble already.

I have an invitation from Mrs. Baker for you to take dinner with us to-day. In fact, I was sent on purpose to bring you. Not a word, not a word!" he continued, at sight of objections gathering on the other's face; "a lady's invitations are sacred, you know. Get your coat!"

Rankin arose with an effort and stood facing his visitor.

"You know I'm always glad to visit you, Baker," he said. "I was n't thinking of holding off on my own account, but I've got someone else to consider now, you know. Ben —"

"Certainly, certainly!" Scotty's voice was eloquent of comprehension. "Throw the kiddie in too. He can play with Flossie; they're about of an age, and she'll be tickled to death to have him."

Rankin looked at his friend a moment peculiarly. "I know Ben's going would be all right with you, Baker," he explained at last, "but how about your wife? Considering — everything — she might object."

The smile left the Englishman's face, and a look of perplexity took its place.

"By Jove!" he said, "you're right! I never thought of that." He shifted from one foot to the other uneasily. "But, pshaw! What's the use of saying anything whatever about the boy's connections? He's nothing but a youngster, — and, besides, his mother's actions are no fault of his."

Rankin took his top-coat off its peg deliberately.

"All right," he said. "I'll call Ben." At the door he paused, looking back, the peculiar expression again upon his face. "As you say, the faults of Ben's mother are not his faults, anyway."

CHAPTER VI

THE SOIL AND THE SEED

WITHIN the Baker home three persons, a woman and two men, were sitting beside a well-discussed table in the perfect content that follows a good meal. Strange to say, in this frontier land, the men had cigars, and their smoke curled slowly toward the ceiling. Intermittently, with the unconscious attitude of indifference we bestow upon happenings remote from our lives, they were discussing the month-old news of the world, which the messenger from town, who supplied at stated intervals the family wants, had brought the day before.

Out of doors, in the warm sunny plat south of the barn, a small boy and a still smaller girl were engaged in the fascinating occupation of becoming acquainted. The little girl was decidedly taking the initiative.

"How's it come your name is Blair?" she asked, opening fire as soon as they were alone.

The boy pondered the question. It had never occurred to him before. Why should he be called Blair? No adequate reason suggested itself.

"I don't know," he admitted.

The little girl wrinkled her forehead in thought.

"It's funny, isn't it?" she said. "Now, my papa's name is Baker, and my name's Florence Baker. You ought to be Ben Rankin — but you aren't." She stroked a diminutive nose with a fairy forefinger. "It's funny," she repeated.

"Oh!" commented Benjamin. He understood now, but explanations were not a part of his philosophy. "Oh!" and the subject dropped.

"Let's play duck on the rock," suggested Florence.

The boy's hands were deep in the recesses of his pockets.

"I don't know how."

"That's nothing." The small brunette had the air of one to whom difficulties were unknown. "I'll show you. Papa and I play, and it's lots of fun — only he beats me." She looked about for available material.

"You get that little box up by the house," she directed, "and we'll have that for the rock."

Ben did as ordered.

"Now bring two tin cans. You'll find a pile back of the barn."

Once more the boy departed, to return a moment later with a pair of "selects," each bearing in gaudy illumination a composite picture of the ingredients of succotash.

"Now watch me," said Florence.

She carried the box about a rod away and planted it firmly on the ground. "This is the rock," she explained. On the top of the box she perched one of the cans, open end up. "And this is the duck — my duck. Do you see?"

The boy had watched the proceedings carefully. "Yes, I see," he said.

Florence came back to the barn. "Now the game is for you to take this other can and knock my duck off. Then we both run, and if you get your can on the box ahead of me, I 'm *it*, and I 'll have to knock off your duck. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"All right." And the sport was on.

Ben poised his missile and carefully let fly.

"He, he!" tittered Florence. "You missed!"

He retrieved his duck without comment.

"Try again; you 've got three chances."

More carefully than before Ben took aim and tossed his can.

"Missed again!" exulted the little brunette. "You 've only one more try." And the brown eyes flashed with mischief.

For the last time Ben stood at position.

"Be careful! you 're out if you miss."

Even more slowly than before the boy took aim, swung his arm overhead clear from the shoulder, and threw with all his might. There was a flash of gaudy paper through the air, a resounding impact of tin against wood, and the make-believe duck skipped away as though fearful of danger.

For a moment Florence stood aghast, but only for a moment; then she stamped a tiny foot imperiously.

"Oh, you naughty boy!" she exclaimed. "You naughty, naughty boy!"

Once more Ben's hands were in his pockets. "Why?" he asked innocently.

"Because you don't play right!"

"You told me to knock the duck off, and I did!"

"But not that way." Florence's small chin was high in the air. "I'm going in the house."

Ben made no motion to follow her, none to prevent her going.

"I'm sorry," he said simply.

The little girl took two steps decidedly, a third haltingly, a fourth, then stopped and looked back out of the corner of her eye.

"Are you very sorry?" she asked.

Ben nodded his head gravely.

There was a moment of indecision. "All right," she said, with apparent reluctance; "but we won't play duck any more. We'll play drop the handkerchief."

The boy discreetly ignored the change of purpose.

"I don't know how," he admitted once more.

Such deplorable ignorance aroused her sympathy.

"Don't Mr. Rankin, or — or anyone — play with you?" she asked.

Ben shook his head.

"All right, then," she said obligingly, "I'll show you."

With her heel she drew upon the ground a rough circle about ten feet in diameter.

"You can't cross that place in there," she said.

The boy looked at the bare ground critically. No visible barrier presented itself to his vision.

"Why not?" he asked.

Florence made a gesture of disapproval. "Because you can't," she explained. Then, some further reason seeming

necessary, she added, "Perhaps there are red-hot irons or snakes, or something, in there. Anyway, you can't cross!"

Ben made no comment, and his instructor looked at him a moment doubtfully.

"Now," she went on, "I stand right here close to the line, and you take the handkerchief." She produced a dainty little kerchief with a "B" embroidered in the corner. "Drop it behind me, and get in my place if you can before I touch you. If you get clear around and catch me before I notice you — you can kiss me. Do you see?"

Ben could see.

"All right, then." And the little girl stood at attention, very prim, apparently very watchful, toes touching the line.

The nature of Benjamin Blair was very direct. The first time he passed, he dropped the handkerchief and proceeded calmly on his journey. His back toward her, the little girl turned and gave a surreptitious glance behind; then quickly shifted to her original position, a look of innocence upon her face. Straight ahead went Ben around the circle — that contained hot irons, or snakes, or something — back to his starting-point, touched the small fragment of femininity upon the shoulder gingerly, as though afraid she would fracture.

"Here's your handkerchief," he said, stooping to recover the bit of linen. "You're *it*."

"Oh, dear!" she said, in mock despair; "you dropped it the first time, didn't you?"

Ben agreed to the statement.

An unaccountable lull followed. In it he caught a

curious sidelong glance from the brown eyes under the drooping lashes.

"I did n't suppose you 'd do that the first time," said the little girl. "Papa never does."

The observation seemed irrelevant to Ben Blair, at least inadequate to halt the game; but he made no comment.

Again there was a lull.

"Well," suggested Florence, and a tinge of red surged beneath the soft brown skin.

Ben began to feel uncomfortable. He had a premonition that all was not well.

"You 're *it*, ain't you?" he hesitated at last.

This time, full and fair, the tiny woman looked at him. The color which before had stood just beneath the skin rose burning to her ears, to the roots of her hair. Her big brown eyes flashed fire.

"Ben Blair," she flamed, "you 're a 'fraid cat!" Tears welled up into her voice, into her eyes, and she made a motion as if to leave; but the sudden passion of a spoiled child was too strong upon her, the mystified face of the other too near, too tempting. With a motion which was all but involuntary, a tiny brown hand shot out and struck the boy fair on the mouth. "A 'fraid cat, 'fraid cat, and I hate you!"

Never before in his short life had Benjamin Blair met a girl. The ethics of sex was a thing unknown to him, but nevertheless some instinct prevented his returning the insult. Except for the red mark upon his lips, his face grew very white.

"What am I afraid of?" he asked steadily.

Defiant still, the girl held her ground.

"Afraid of what?" she jeered. "You're afraid of everything! 'Fraid cats always are!"

"But what?" pressed the boy. "Tell me something I'm afraid of."

Florence glanced about her. The tall roof of the barn caught her vision.

"You wouldn't dare jump off the roof there, for one thing," she ventured.

Ben looked up. The point mentioned arose at least sixteen feet, and the earth beneath was frozen like asphalt, but he did not hesitate. At the north end, a stack of hay piled against the wall formed a sort of inclined plane, and making a detour he began to climb. Half-way up he lost his footing and came tumbling to the ground; but still he said nothing. The next time he was more careful, and reached the ridge-pole without accident. Below, the little girl, brilliant in her red jacket, stood watching him; but he never even glanced at her. Instead, he raised himself to his full height, looked once at the ground beneath, and jumped.

That instant a wave of contrition swept over Florence. In a sort of vision she saw the boy lying injured, perhaps dead, upon the frozen ground, — and all through her fault! She shut her eyes, and clasped her hands over her face.

A few seconds passed, bringing with them no further sound, and she slowly opened her fingers. Through them, instead of a prostrate corpse, she saw the boy standing erect before her. There was a smear of dust upon his coat and face where he had fallen, and a scratch upon his cheek,

which bled a bit, but otherwise he was apparently unhurt. From beneath his long lashes as she looked, the blue eyes met hers, deliberate and unsmiling.

As swiftly as it had come, the mood of contrition passed. In an indefinite sort of way the girl experienced a sensation of disappointment, — a feeling of being deprived of something which was her due. She was only a child, a spoiled child, and her defiance arose anew. A moment so the children faced each other.

"Do you still think I 'm afraid?" asked the boy at last.

Again the hot color flamed beneath the brown skin.

"Pooh!" said the girl, "*that* was nothing!" She tossed her head in derision. "Anyone could do that!"

Ben slowly took off his cap, slapped it against his knee to shake off the dust, and put it back upon his head. The action took only a half minute, but when the girl looked at him again it hardly seemed he was the same boy with whom she had just played. His eyes were no longer blue, but gray. The chin, too, with an odd trick, — one she was destined to know better in future, — had protruded, had become the dominant feature of his face, aggressive, almost menacing. Except for the size, one looking could scarcely have believed Ben's visage was that of a child.

"What," the boy's hands went back into his pockets, "what would n't anyone do, then?" he asked directly.

At that moment Florence Baker would have been glad to occupy some other person's shoes. Obviously, the proper thing for her to do was to admit her fault and clear the atmosphere, but that did not accord with her disposition, and she looked about for a suggestion. One

came promptly, but at first she did not speak. Then the brown head tossed again.

"Some folks would be afraid to ride one of those colts out there!" She indicated the pasture near by. "Papa said the other day he'd rather not be the first to try."

The colts mentioned were a bunch of four-year-olds that Scotty had just imported from an Eastern breeder. They were absolutely unbroken, but every ounce thoroughbreds, and full to the ear-tips of what the Englishman expressively termed "ginger."

To her credit be it said, the small Florence had no idea that her challenge would be accepted. Implicit trust in her father was one of her virtues, and the mere suggestion that another would attempt to do what he would not, was rankest heresy. But the boy Benjamin started for the barn, and, securing a bridle and a pan of oats, moved toward the gate. Instinctively Florence took a step after him.

"Really, I didn't mean for you to try," she explained in swift penitence. "I don't think you're afraid!"

Ben opened and closed the gate silently.

"Please don't do it," pleaded the girl. "You'll be hurt!"

But for all the effect her petition had, she might as well have asked the sun to cease shining. Nothing could stop that gray-eyed boy. Without a show of haste he advanced toward the nearest colt, shook the oats in the pan, and whistled enticingly. Full often in his short life he had seen the trick done before, and he waited expectantly.

Florence, forgetting her fears, watched with interest.

At first the colt was shy, but gradually, under stimulus of its appetite, it drew nearer, then ran frisking away, again drew near. Ben held out the pan, shook it at intervals, displaying its contents to the best advantage. Colt nature could not resist the appeal. The sleek thoroughbred cast aside all scruples, came close, and thrust a silken muzzle deep into the grain.

Still without haste, the boy put on the bridle, holding the pan near the ground to reach the straps over the ears; then, pausing, looked at the back far above his head. How he was to get up there would have perplexed an observer. For a moment it puzzled the boy; then an idea occurred to him. Once more holding the remnants of the oats near the ground, he waited until the hungry nose was deep amongst them, the head well lowered; then, improving his opportunity, he swung one leg over the sleek neck and awaited developments.

He was not long in suspense. The action was like touching flame to powder; the resulting explosion was all but simultaneous. With a snort, the head went high in air, tossing the grain about like seed, and down the inclined plane of the neck thus formed the long-legged Benjamin slid to the slippery back. Once there, an instinct told him to grip the rounding flank with his ankles, and clutch the heavy mane.

And he was none too quick. For a moment the colt paused in pure wonder at the audacity of the thing; then, with a neigh, half of anger and half of fear, it sprang away at top speed, circling and recircling, flashing in and out among the other horses, the fragment of humanity on

its back meanwhile clinging to his place like a monkey. For a minute, then another, the youngster kept his seat, pulling upon the reins at intervals, gripping together his small knees until the muscles ached. Then suddenly the colt, changing its tactics, planted its front feet firmly into the ground, stopped short, and the small Benjamin shot overhead, to strike the turf beyond with an impact which fairly drove the breath from his body. But even then, half unconscious as he was, he would n't let loose of the reins. Not until the now thoroughly aroused colt had dragged him for rods, did the leather break, leaving the boy and the bridle in a most disreputable-looking heap upon the earth.

Florence had watched the scene with breathless interest. While Ben was making his mount, she observed him doubtfully. While he retained his seat, she clapped her hands in glee. Then, with his downfall, a great lump came chokingly into her throat, and, without waiting to see the outcome, she ran sobbing to the house. A moment later she rushed into the little parlor where her father and Rankin, their cigars finished, were sitting and chatting.

"Papa," she pleaded, "papa, go quick! Ben 's killed!"

"Great Cæsar's ghost!" exclaimed Scotty, springing up nervously, and holding the little girl at arm's length. "What 's the matter?"

"Ben, Ben, I told you! He tried to ride one of the colts, and he 's killed — I know he is!"

"Holy buckets!" Genuine apprehension was in the Englishman's voice. Without waiting for further expla-

nation he shot out of the door, and ran full tilt to the paddock behind the barn. There he stopped, and Rankin coming up a moment later, the two men stood side by side watching the approach of a small figure still some rods away. The boy's face and hands were marked with blood-stains from numerous scratches; one leg of his trousers was torn disclosing the skin, and upon that side when he walked he limped noticeably. All these things the two men observed at a distance. When he came closer, they were forgotten in the look upon his small face. The odd trick the boy had of throwing his lower jaw forward was now emphasized until the lower teeth fairly overshot the upper. In sympathy, the eyes had tightened, not morosely or cruelly, but with a fixed determination which was all but uncanny. Scotty shifted a bit uncomfortably.

"By Jove!" he remarked, with his usual unconscious expletive, "I 'd rather have a tiger-cat on my trail than that youngster, if he was to look that way. What do you suppose he 's got in his cranium now?"

Rankin shook his head. "I don't know. He 's beyond me."

Scarcely a minute passed before the boy returned. He had another bridle in his hand and a fresh pan of oats. As before, he started to pass without a word, but Rankin halted him. "What 's the matter with your clothes, Ben?" he queried.

The lad looked at his questioner. "Horse threw me, sir."

"And what are you going to do now?"

"Going to try to ride him again, sir."

Rankin paused, his face growing momentarily more severe.

"Ben," he said at last, "did Mr. Baker hire you to break his horses? If I were you I'd put those things away and ask his pardon."

The boy looked from one man to the other uncertainly. Obviously, this phase of the matter had not occurred to him. Obviously, too, the point of view must be correct, for both Rankin and Scotty were solemn as the grave. The lad shot out toward the pasture a glance that spoke volumes; then he turned to Baker.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said.

Scotty caught his cue. "Granted — this time," he answered.

A half-hour later, Rankin and Ben, the latter carefully washed, the rents in his trousers temporarily repaired, were ready to go home. Not until the very last moment did Florence appear; then, her face a bit flushed, she came out to the buckboard.

"Good-bye," she said simply. There was a moment's pause; then, with a deepening color, she turned to Ben Blair. "Come again soon," she added in a low tone.

CHAPTER VII

THE SANITY OF THE WILD

SUMMER, tan-colored, musical with note of katy-did and cicada, and the constant purr of the south wind, was upon the prairie country. Under the eternal law of necessity, — the necessity of sunburnt, stunted grass, — the boundaries of the range extended far in every direction. The herds bearing the ⌊R brand no longer fed in one body, but scattered far and wide. Often for a week at a time the men did not sleep under cover. Morning and night, when a semblance of dew was upon the blighted grass, the cattle grazed. The life was primitive and natural almost beyond belief in a world of artificial civilization; but it was independent, care-free, and healthy.

The land surrounding the ranch-house was now almost as bare as the palm of a hand. Only one object relieved the impression of desolation, and that was a tree. It stood carefully fenced about in the drain from the big artesian well, — a vivid blot of green against the dun background. The first year after he came, Rankin had imported it, — a goodly sized soft maple; and in the pathway of constantly trickling water, it had grown and prospered. It was the only tree for miles and miles

about, except the scrawny scrub-oaks, cotton-woods, and wild plums that flanked the infrequent creeks, — creeks which in Summer, save in deepest holes, reverted to mere dry runs. Beneath its shade Rankin had constructed a rough bench, and therein Ma Graham, day after day when her housework was finished, dozed and sewed and dozed again, apparently as forgetful as the cowboys upon the prairies that beyond her vision were great cities where countless thousands of human beings sweltered and struggled in desperate competition for daily bread.

So much for the day. With the coming of dusk, a coolness like a benediction took the place of heat. The south wind gradually died down with the descending sun, until immediately following the setting it was absolutely still; now it sprang up anew, and wandered on until the break of day.

Such an evening in late July found Rankin and Baker stretched out like boys upon a pile of hay in the latter's yard. The big man had just arrived; the old buckboard, with its mouse-colored mustangs, stood just as he had driven it up. Scotty knew him well enough to know that he had come for a purpose, and he awaited its revelation. Rankin slowly filled and lit his pipe, drew thereon until the glow from the bowl was reflected upon his face, and blew a great cloud of smoke out into the gathering dusk.

"Baker," he asked at last, "what are we going to do for the education of these youngsters of ours? We can't let them grow up here like savages."

Scotty rolled over on his side, and leaned his head comfortably in his hand.

"I 've thought of that," he answered, "and there seems to me only one of two things to do — either move into civilization, or import a pedagogue." A pause, and a whimsical inflection came into his voice. "Unfortunately, however, neither plan seems exactly practical at this time."

Rankin smoked a minute in silence. "How would it do to move into civilization six months of the year — the Winter six?" he suggested.

Scotty considered for a moment. "Do you mean that seriously?" he asked.

"Yes."

By the sense of feeling alone, the Englishman rolled a cigarette skilfully. "How about the stock here while we 're gone," he said hesitatingly. "Do you suppose we 'd find anything left when we came back in the Spring?"

Rankin crowded the half-burned tobacco down into the pipe-bowl with his little finger. "I don't think you got the idea," he explained. "My plan was for you to go East in the Fall and put the kids in school. I 'd stay here and see that everything ran smoothly while you were gone. Mrs. Baker has said a dozen times that she wanted a change — for a time, anyway."

Scotty threw one long leg over the other. "As usual you 're right, Rankin," he said slowly. "The Lord knows Mollie gets restless enough at times. People were like ants in a hill where she was raised, and that life was a part of her." He took a last puff at the cigarette, and with a toss sent the smoking stump spinning like a firefly into the darkness. "And Flossie can't grow up wild — I know that. I 'll talk your suggestion over with Mollie

first, but I think I 'd be safe in saying right now that we 'll accept."

For a moment Rankin did not speak ; then he knocked the ashes out of his pipe upon his heel.

" Excuse me if I keep going back to something unpleasant, Baker," he said slowly, " but in considering the matter there 's one thing I don't want you to forget." Then, after a meaning pause, he went on : " It 's the same reason I had for not introducing Ben in the first place."

Scotty drew out his book of rice-paper again almost involuntarily.

" I 'd thought of that this time," he said ; then paused to finger a gauzy sheet absently. " I don't see why I should consider it now, though — seeing I did n't before."

Rankin said nothing, and conversation lapsed. Irresistibly, but so gradually as to be all but unconscious, the spirit of the prairie night — a sensation, a conception of infinite vastness, of unassailable serenity — stole over and took possession of the men. The ambitious and manifold artificial needs for which men barter their happiness, their sense of humanity, even life itself, seemed beyond belief out there alone with the stars, with the prairie night-wind singing in the ears ; seemed so puny that they elicited only a smile. The lust of show, of extravagance, follies, wisdoms, man's loves and hates — how their true proportions stand revealed against the eternal background of immeasurable distance, in nature's vast scheme !

Scotty cleared his throat. " I used to think, when I first came here, that I 'd been a fool ; but now, somehow, at times like this, I wonder if I did n't blunder into the

wisest act of my life." The prairie spirit had taken hold of him. "And the longer I stay the more it grows upon me that such a life as this, where one's success is not the measure of another's failure, is the only one to live. It is the only life," he added after a pause.

Rankin said nothing.

Scotty was silent for a moment, but the mood was too strong for him to remain so, and he went on.

"I know the ordinary person would laugh if I said it, but really, I believe I 'm developing a distaste for money. It 's simply another term for caste ; and that word, with the unreasoning superiority it implies, has somehow become hateful to me." He looked up into the night.

"I used to think I was happy back in England. I had my home and my associates ; born so, because their fathers were friends of my father, their grandfathers of my grandfather's class. As a small landlord I had my gentlemanly leisure ; but as well as I know my name, I realize now that I could never return to that life again. Looking back, I see its intolerable narrowness, its petty smugness. By comparison it 's like the relative clearness of the atmosphere there and here. There, perhaps I could see a few miles : here, I look away over leagues and leagues of distance. It 's symbolic." The voice paused ; the face, turned directly toward his companion's, tried in the half-darkness to read its expression. "I 've been in this prairie country long enough now to realize that financially I 've made a mistake. I can earn a living, and that 's all ; but nevertheless I 'm happy — happier than I ever realized it was possible for me to be. I 've got enough — more would

be a burden to me. If I have a trouble in the world, it 's because I see the inevitable prospect of money in the future, — money I don't want, for I 'm an only son and my father is comparatively wealthy. Without turning his hand, his rent-roll is five thousand pounds a year. He 's getting along in life. Some day — it may be five years, it may be fifteen — he will die and leave it to me. I am to maintain and pass on the family name, the family dignity. It was all cut and dried generations back, generations before I was born."

Still Rankin said nothing. For any indication he gave, the other's revelation might have been only that he had a hundred dollars deposited in the savings bank against a rainy day.

But Scotty was now fairly under headway. He stripped his reserve and confidence bare.

"You see now why I 'm glad to consider your proposition. Whatever I believe myself must be of secondary importance. I 've others to think about — Florence and her mother. Flossie is only a child, but Mollie is a woman, and has lived her life in sight of the brazen calf. She does n't realize, she never can realize, that it is of brass and not of gold. Personally, I believe, as I believe in my own existence, that Flossie would be immeasurably happier if she never saw the other side of life, — the artificial side, — but lived right here, knowing what we taught her and developing like a healthy animal ; perhaps, when the time came, marrying a rancher, having her own home, her own family interests, and living close to nature. But it can't be. I 've got to develop her, cultivate her, fit her for any

society." The voice paused, and the speaker turned his face away.

"God knows, — and He knows also that I love her dearly, — that looking into the future I wish sometimes she were the daughter of another man."

The minutes passed. The ponies shifted restlessly and then were still. In the lull, the soft night-breeze crooned its minor song, while near or far away — no human ear could measure the distance — a prairie owl gave its weird cry. Then silence fell as before.

Once more Scotty turned, facing his companion.

"I 've a question to ask you, Rankin; may I ask it without offence?"

The big man nodded. By the starlight Baker caught the motion.

"You told me once that you were a college man, and that you had a Master's degree. From the very first you started cattle-raising on a big scale. You must have had money. Still, such being the case, you left culture and civilization far behind and came here to choose a life absolutely different. I have told you why I wish to educate my daughter. But why, feeling as you must have felt and must still feel, since you 're here, why do you wish to educate this waif boy you 've picked up? By all the standards of convention, he is at the very bottom of the social scale. Why do you want to do this?"

It was a psychological moment. Even in the semi-darkness, Rankin felt the other's eyes fixed piercingly upon him. He passed his hand over his face; he seemed about to speak. But the habit of reticence was too strong

upon him. Even the inspiration of the Englishman's confidence was not sufficient to break the seal of his own reserve. He arose slowly and shook the clinging wisps of hay from his clothes.

"For somewhat the same reason as your own," he answered at last. "Ben, like Flossie, is a child, an odd old child to be sure, but nevertheless a child. I have no reason to know that when he grows up his beliefs will be my beliefs. He must see both sides of the coin, and judge for himself."

The speaker paused, then walked slowly over to the old buckboard. "It 's getting late, and I 've got a long drive home." With an effort he mounted into the seat and picked up the reins. "Good-night."

Scotty hesitated a moment, and then said, "Good-night."

CHAPTER VIII

THE GLITTER OF THE UNKNOWN

TWELVE years slipped by. Short as they seemed to those actually living them, they had brought great material changes. No longer did the ranch cattle graze at the will of their owners, but, under stress of competition, they browsed within the confines of miles upon miles of galvanized fencing. Neighbors, as Rankin said, were near now. There were four within a radius of twenty miles. To be sure, there was still plenty of land west of them, beyond the broad muddy Missouri, — open rough land, gradually rising in elevation, where a traveller could journey for days and days without seeing a human face. But this was not then a part of the so-called "cattle ranges." In the parlance of the country, that was "West," — a place to hunt in, a refuge for criminals, but as yet giving no indication of ever becoming of practical use.

The ⌊R Ranch had evolved along with the others, and always well in advance. The house now boasted six rooms; the barn and stock-sheds had at a distance the appearance of a town in themselves; the collection of haying implements — mowers, loaders, stackers — was almost complete enough to stock a jobbing house. The herd itself had

augmented, despite its annual reduction, until one artesian well was inadequate to supply water; and fifteen miles north, at the extreme limit of his home-ranch, Rankin had sunk another well, making a sort of sub-station of that point. From it an observer with good eyes could see the outlines of the modern Big B Ranch property, built on the old site, and ostensibly operated by a long-legged Yankee, Rob Hoyt by name, but in reality owned, as had been the remnant of stock Tom Blair left behind him, by saloon-keeper Mick Kennedy.

The ranch force had changed very little. Rankin, stouter by a quarter-hundred weight, shaggier of eyebrows and with an accentuated droop in the upper eyelids, and if possible an increased taciturnity, still lived his daytime life mainly on wheels. The old buckboard had finally succumbed, but its counterpart, mud-spattered and weather-bleached, had taken its place. In the kitchen, Ma Graham still presided, her accumulated avoirdupois seeming to have been gathered at the expense of her lord, who in equal ratio thinner and more weazened, danced attendance as of old. Only one of the former cowboys now remained. That one, strange to say, was Grannis, the "man from nowhere," who had apparently taken root at last. Regularly on the last day of each month he drew his pay, and without a word of explanation or comment disappeared upon the back of a cow-pony, to reappear, perhaps in ten hours, perhaps in sixty, dead broke, with a thirst seemingly unappeasable, but quite non-committal concerning his experience, apparently satisfied and ready to take up the dull routine of his life again.

Last of all, Benjamin Blair. Precisely as the boy had given promise, the youth had developed. He was now mature in size, in poise, in action. Long of leg, long of arm, long of face, he stood a half head above Rankin, who had been the tallest man upon the place. Yet he was not awkward. Physically he was of the type, but magnified, to which all cowboys belong; and no one would ever call him awkward or uncouth.

There had been less change upon the Baker ranch. Scotty was not an expansionist. Scarcely a score more horses grazed in his paddock than of old. The barn, though often repaired, was still of sod and thatch. The house contained the original number of rooms. The experiment with trees had never been repeated. If possible, the man himself had altered even less than his surroundings. Scrupulously fresh-shaven each day, fortified beyond the compound lenses of his spectacles, a stranger would have guessed him anywhere from thirty-five to fifty.

Time had not dealt as kindly with Mrs. Baker. She seemed to have aged enough for both herself and her husband. Notwithstanding the fact that for the first eight years of the twelve, the family had spent half their time in the East, she had grown careless of her appearance. True to his instincts, Scotty still dressed for dinner in his antiquated evening clothes; but pathetic as was the example, it had long ceased to stimulate her. The last four years had been dead years with Mollie Baker. The future held but one promise. She referred to it daily, almost hourly; and at such times only would a trace of youth and beauty return to the one-time winsome face. She looked

forward and dreamed of an event after which she would do certain things upon which she had set her heart; when, as she said, she would begin to live. It seemed to Scotty ghastly to speak about that event, for it was the death of his father.

The last member of the family had developed with the child's promise, and at seventeen Florence was beautiful; not with a conventional prettiness, but with a vital feminine attraction. All that the mother had been, with her dark, oval face, her mass of walnut-brown hair, her great dark eyes, her uptilted chin, the daughter was now; but with added health and an augmented femininity that the mother had never known. Moreover, she had an independence, a dominance, born perhaps of the wild prairie influence, that at times made her parents almost gasp. Except in the minute details of their daily existence, which habit had made unchangeable, she ruled them absolutely. Even Rankin had become a secondary factor. Scotty probably would have denied the assertion emphatically, yet at the bottom of his consciousness he realized that had she told him to sell everything he possessed for what he could get and return to old Sussex he would have complied. Considering Mollie's daily plaint, it was a constant source of wonder to him that the girl did not do this; but she seemed wholly satisfied with things as they were. For exercise and excitement she rode almost every horse upon the place — rode astride like a man. For amusement she read everything she could lay hands upon, both from the modest Baker library and from the larger and more creditable collection which Rankin had imported

from the East. This was the first real library that had ever entered the State, and, subject for speculation, it had uniformly the front fly-leaves remaining as mere stubs, as though the pages had been torn out by a hurried hand. What name was it that had been in those hundreds of volumes? For what reason had it been so carefully removed? The girl had often speculated thereon, and fitted theory after theory; but never yet, wilful as she was, had she had the temerity to ask the only person who could have given explanation, — Rankin himself.

In common with her sisters everywhere, Florence had an instinctive love of a fad. Realizing this fact, Scotty was not in the least deceived when, during a lull at the dinner-table one evening late in the Fall, she broke in with an irrelevant though seemingly innocent remark.

"I saw several big jack-rabbits when I was out riding this morning." The dark eyes turned upon her father quizzically, humorously. "They seem to be very plentiful."

"Yes," said Scotty; "they always are in the Fall."

Florence ate for a moment in silence.

"Did you ever think how much sport we could have if we owned a couple of hounds?" she asked.

Scotty was silent; but Mollie threw up her hands in horror. "You don't really mean that you want any of those hungry-looking dogs around, do you, Flossie?" she protested pettishly. "Seems as though you 'd be satisfied with riding the horses tomboy style without going to hunting rabbits that way."

The daughter's color heightened and the matter dropped; but Scotty knew the main attack was yet to

come. He had learned from experience the methods of his daughter in attaining an object.

Later in the evening father and daughter were alone beside a well-shaded lamp in the cosey sitting-room. Mollie had retired early, complaining of a headache, and carrying with her an air of martyrdom even more pronounced than usual; so noticeable, in fact, that, absently watching the door through which she had left, an expression of positive gloom formed over Scotty's thin face. Two strong young arms fell suddenly about his neck and abruptly changed his thoughts. A soft warm cheek was laid against his own.

"Poor old daddy!" whispered a caressing voice.

For a moment Scotty did not move; then, turning, he looked into the brown eyes. "Why?" he asked.

"Because," — her voice was low, her answering look was steady, — "because it won't be but a little while until he'll have to move away — move back into civilization."

For a moment neither spoke; then, with a last pressure of her cheek against her father's, the girl crossed the room and took another chair. Scotty followed her with his eyes.

"Are you against me, too, little girl?" he asked.

Florence reached over to the table, took up an ever-ready strip of rice-paper, and, rolling a cigarette, tendered it with the air of a peace-offering.

"No, I'm not against you; but it's got to come. Mamma simply can't change. She can't find anything here to interest her, and we've got to take her away — for good."

Scotty slowly struck a sulphur match, waited until the

flame had burned well along the wood, then deliberately lit his cigarette and burned it to a stump.

"Are n't you happy here, Flossie?" he asked gently.

The girl's hands were folded in her lap, her eyes looked past him absently.

"Really, for once in my life," she answered seriously, "I spoke quite unselfishly. I was thinking only of mamma." There was a pause, and a deeper concentration in the brown eyes. "As for myself, I hardly know. Yes, I do know. I 'm happy now, but I would n't be long. The life here is too narrow; I 'd lose interest in it. At last I 'd have a frantic desire, one I could n't resist, to peep just over the edge of the horizon and take part in whatever is going on beyond." She smiled. "I might run away, or marry an Indian, or do something shocking!"

Scotty flicked off a bit of ashes with his little finger.

"Can't you think of anything that would interest you and broaden your life enough to make it pleasant?" he ventured.

This time mirth shone upon the girl's face, and a laugh sounded in her voice.

"Papa, papa," she said, "I did n't think that of you! Are you so anxious to get rid of your daughter?" As swiftly as it had come, the smile vanished, leaving in its place a softer and warmer color.

"I 'm not enough of a hypocrite," she added slowly, "to pretend not to understand what you mean. Yes, I believe if there is a man in the world I could care enough for to marry, I could live here or anywhere with him and be per-

fectly happy; but that is n't possible. I 'm of the wrong disposition." The soft color in the cheek grew warmer, the brown eyes sparkled. "I know myself well enough to realize that any man I could care for would n't live out here. He 'd be one who did things, and did them better than others; and to do things he 'd have to be where others are. No, I never could live here."

Scotty dropped the dead cigarette stump into an ash-tray, and brushed a stray speck of dust from his sleeve.

"In other words, you could never care for such a man as your father," he remarked quietly.

The girl instantly realized what she had said, and springing up she threw her arms impulsively about her father's neck.

"Dear old daddy!" she said. "There is n't another man in the world like you! I love you dearly, dearly!" The soft lips touched his cheek again and again. But for the first time in her life that Florence could remember, her father did not respond. Instead, he gently freed himself.

"Nevertheless," he said, steadily, "the fact remains. You could never marry a man like your father, — one who had no desire to be known of men, but who simply loved you and would do anything in his power to make you happy. You have said it." Scotty rose slowly, the youthfulness of his movements gone, the expression of age unconsciously creeping into the wrinkles at his temples and at the corners of his mouth. "You have hurt me, Florence."

The girl was at once repentant, but her repentance came too late. She dropped her face into her hands.

"Oh, daddy, daddy!" she pleaded, but could not say another word. Indeed, there was nothing to be said.

Scotty moved silently about the room, closed a book he had laid face downward upon the table, picked up a paper which had fallen to the floor, and wound the clock for the night. At the doorway to his sleeping-room he paused.

"You said something at dinner to-night about wanting some hounds, Florence. I know where I can buy a pair, and I'll see that you have them." He opened the door slowly, then quietly closed it. "And about our leaving here. I have always expected to go sometime, but I hoped it wouldn't be necessary for a while yet." He paused, fingering the knob absently. "I'm ready, though, whenever you and your mother wish."

This time the door closed behind him, and, alone within the room, the girl sobbed as though her heart would break.

CHAPTER IX

A RIFFLE OF PRAIRIE

FLORENCE got her dogs promptly. They were two big mouse-colored grayhounds, with tails like rats and protruding ribs. They were named "Racer" and "Pacer," and were warranted by their late owner to out-distance any rabbit that ever drew breath. The girl felt that an event as important as a coursing should be the occasion of a gathering of the neighboring ranchers; but at the mere suggestion her conventional mother threw up her hands in horror. It was bad enough for her daughter to go out alone, but as the one woman among all that lot of cowboys — it was too much for her to endure. Finally, as a compromise, Florence agreed to invite only the people of the LR Ranch to the first event. So the invitations for a certain day, composed with fitting formality, were sent, and in due time were ceremoniously accepted.

The chase was scheduled to begin soon after daybreak, and before that time Rankin and Ben Blair were at the Baker house. They wore their ordinary clothes of wool and leather, but Scotty appeared in a wonderful red hunting-coat, which, though a bit moth-eaten in spots, nevertheless showed glaringly against the brown earth of the ranch-house yard.

With the exception of the dogs, which were kept properly hungry for the hunt, and Mollie, who had washed her hands of the whole affair, the party all had breakfast, Scotty himself serving the coffee with the skill of a head-waiter. Then the old buckboard, carefully oiled and tightened for the occasion, was gotten out, a team of the fastest, wiriest mustangs the [R possessed was attached, and Rankin and Baker upon the seat, Florence and Ben, well-mounted, trailing behind, the party sallied forth. In order to avoid fences they had agreed to go ten miles to the south before beginning operations. There a great tract of government land, well grazed but untouched by the hand of man, gave all but unlimited room.

The morning was beautiful and clear beyond the comprehension of city dwellers, a typical day of prairie Dakota in late Fall. Far out over the broad expanse, indefinite as to distance, the rising sun seemed resting upon the very rim of the world. All about, near at hand, stretching into the horizon, glistening, sparkling, innumerable frost crystals, product of the past night, gleamed like scattered gems, showing in their coloring every blended shade of the rainbow. The glory of it all appealed to the girl, and throwing back her head she drew in deep breaths of the tonic air.

"I'm going to miss these mornings terribly when I'm gone," she said soberly.

Ben Blair scrutinized the backs of the two men in the buckboard with apparent interest.

"I didn't know you intended leaving," he said. "Where are you going?"

Florence regarded her companion from the corner of her eye.

"I 'm going away for good," she said.

Ben shifted half around in the saddle and folded back the rim of his big sombrero.

"For good, you say?"

The girl's brown eyes were cast down demurely. "Yes, for good," she repeated.

They had been losing ground. Now in silence they galloped ahead, the regular muffled patter of their horses' feet upon the frozen sod sounding like the distant rattle of a snare-drum. Once again even with the buckboard, they lapsed into a walk.

"You haven't told me where you 're going," repeated Blair.

The question seemed to be of purest politeness, as a host inquires if his visitor has rested well; yet for a dozen years they two had lived nearest neighbors, and had grown to maturity side by side. She concluded there were some phases of this silent youth which she had not yet learned.

"We haven't decided where we 're going yet," she replied. "Mamma wants to go to England, but papa and I refuse to leave this country. Then daddy wants to live in a small town, and I vote for a big one. Just now we 're at deadlock."

A smile started in Ben's blue eyes and spread over his thin face.

"From the way you talk," he said, "I have a suspicion the deadlock won't last long. If I stretch my imagination a little I can guess pretty close to the decision."

Florence was sober a moment; then a smile flashed over her face and left the daintiest of dimples in either cheek.

"Maybe you can," she said.

For the second time they galloped ahead and caught up with the slower buckboard.

"Florence," Ben threw one leg over the pommel of his saddle and faced his companion squarely, "I've heard your mother talk, and of course I understand why she wants to go back among her folks, but you were raised here. Why do you want to leave?"

The girl hesitated, and ran her fingers through her horse's mane.

"Mamma's been here against her will for a good many years. We ought to go for her sake."

Ben made a motion of deprecation. "What I want to know is the real reason, — your own reason," he said.

The warm blood flushed Florence's face. "By what right do you ask that?" she retorted. "You seem to forget that we've both grown up since we went to school together."

Ben looked calmly out over the prairie.

"No, I don't forget; and I admit I have no right to ask. But I may ask as a friend, I am sure. Why do you want to go?"

Again the girl hesitated. Logically she should refuse to answer. To do otherwise was to admit that her first answer was an evasion; but something, an influence that always controlled her in Ben's presence, prevented refusal. Slow of speech, deliberate of movement as he was, there was about him a force that dominated her, even as she

dominated her parents, and, worst of all — to her inmost self she admitted the fact — it fascinated her as well. With all her strength she rebelled against the knowledge and combated the influence, but in vain. Instead of replying, she chirruped to her horse. "It seems to me," she said, "it 's just as well to begin hunting here as to go further. I 'm going on ahead to ask papa and Mr. Rankin."

With a grave smile, Blair reached over and caught her bridle-rein, saying carelessly: "Pardon me, but you forget something you were going to tell me."

The girl's brown cheeks crimsoned anew, but this time there was no hesitation in her reply.

"Very well, since you insist, I 'll answer your question; but don't be surprised if I offend you." A dainty hand tugged at the loosened button of her riding-glove. "I 'm going away, for one reason, because I want to be where things move, and where I don't always know what is going to happen to-morrow." She turned to her companion directly. "But most of all, I 'm going because I want to be among people who have ambitions, who do things, things worth while. I am tired of just existing, like the animals, from day to day. I was only a young girl when we were going to school, but now I know why I liked that life so well. It was because of the intense activity, the constant movement, the competition, the evolution. I like it! I want to be a part of it!"

"Thank you for telling me," said Ben, quietly.

But now the girl was in no hurry to hasten on. She forgot that her explanation was given under protest. It had become a confession.

"Up to the last few years I never thought much about the future — I took it for granted; but since then it has been different. Unconsciously, I've become a woman. All the little things that belong to women's lives, too small to tell, begin to appeal to me. I want to live in a good house and have good clothes and know people. I want to go to shops and theatres and concerts; all these things belong to me and I intend to have them."

"I think I understand," said Ben, slowly. "Yes, I'm sure I understand," he repeated.

But the girl did not heed him. "Last of all, there's another reason," she went on. "I don't know why I should n't speak it, as well as think it, for it's the greatest of all. I'm a young woman. I won't remain such long. I don't want to be a spinster. I know I'm not supposed to say these things, but why not? I want to meet men, men of my own class, my parents' class, men who know something besides the weight of a steer and the value of a bronco, — some man I could respect and care for." Again she turned directly to her companion. "Do you wonder I want to change, that I want to leave these prairies, much as I like them?"

It was long before Ben Blair spoke. He scarcely stirred in his seat; then of a sudden, rousing, he threw his leg back over the saddle.

"No," he said slowly, "I don't wonder — looking at things your way. It's all in the point of view. But perhaps yours is wrong, maybe you don't think of the other side of that life. There usually is another side to everything, I've noticed." He glanced ahead. A half-mile on,

the buckboard had stopped, and Scotty was standing up on the seat and motioning the laggards energetically.

"I think we 'd better dust up a little. Your father seems to have struck something interesting."

Florence seemed inclined to linger, but Scotty's waving cap was insistent, and they galloped ahead.

They found Rankin sitting upon the wagon seat, smoking impassively as usual; but the Englishman was upon the ground holding the two hounds by the collars. Behind the big compound lenses his eyes were twinkling excitedly, and he was smiling like a boy.

"Look out there!" he exclaimed with a jerk of his head, "over to the west. We all but missed him! Are you ready?"

They all looked and saw, perhaps thirty rods away, a grayish-white jack-rabbit, distinct by contrast with the brown earth. The hounds had also caught sight of the game and pulled lustily at their collars.

Instantly Florence was all excitement. "Of course we 're ready! No, wait a second, until I see about my saddle." She dismounted precipitately. "Tighten the cinch a bit, won't you, Ben? I don't mind a tumble, but it might interfere at a critical moment." She put her foot in his extended hand, and sprang back into her seat. "Now, I'm ready. Come on, Ben! Let them go, papa! Be in at the finish if you can!" and, a second behind the hounds, she was away. Simultaneously, the great jack-rabbit, scenting danger, leaped forward, a ball of animate rubber, bounding farther and farther as he got under full motion, speeding away toward the blue distance.

The chase that followed was a thing to live in memory. From the nature of the land, gently rolling to the horizon without an obstruction the height of a man's hand, there was no possibility of escape for the quarry. The outcome was as mathematically certain as a problem in arithmetic; the only uncertain element was that of time. At first the jack seemed to be gaining, but gradually the greater endurance of the hounds began to count, and foot by foot the gap between pursuers and pursued lessened. In the beginning the rabbit ran in great leaps, as though glorying in the speed that it would seem no other animal could equal, but very soon his movements changed; his ears were flattened tight to his head, and, with every muscle strained to the utmost, he ran wildly for his life.

Meanwhile, the four hunters were following as best they might. In the all but soundless atmosphere, the rattle of the old buckboard could be heard a quarter of a mile. Alternately losing and gaining ground as they cut off angles and followed the diameter instead of the circumference of the great circles the rabbit described, the drivers were always within sight. Closer behind the hounds and following the same course, Florence rode her thoroughbred like mad, with Ben Blair at her side. The pace was terrific. The rush of the crisp morning air sang in their ears and cut keenly at their faces. The tattoo of the horses' feet upon the hard earth was continuous. Beneath her riding-cap, the girl's hair was loosened and swept free in the wind. Her color was high, her eyes sparkled. Never before had the man at her side seen her so fair to gaze upon; but despite the excitement, despite the rush of action, there

was a jarring note in her beauty. Deep in his nature, ingrained, elemental, was the love of fair play. Though he was in the chase and a part of it, his sympathies were far from being with the hounds. That the girl should favor the strong over the weak was something he could not understand — a blemish that even her beauty did not excuse.

A quarter-hour passed. The sun rose from the lap of the prairie and scattered the frost-crystals as though they had been mist. The chase was near its end. All moved more slowly. A dozen times since they had started, it seemed as if the hounds must soon catch their prey, that in another second all would be over; but each time the rabbit had escaped, had at the last instant shot into the air, while the hounds rushed harmlessly beneath, and, ere they recovered, had gained a goodly lead again in a new course. But now that time was past, and he was tired and weak. It was a straight-away race, with the hounds scarcely twenty feet behind. Back of the latter, perhaps ten rods, were the riders, still side by side as at first. Their horses were covered with foam and blowing steadily, but nevertheless they galloped on gallantly. Bringing up the rear, just in sight but now out of sound, was the buckboard. Thus they approached the finish.

Inch by inch the dogs gained upon the rabbit. Standing in his stirrups, Ben Blair, the seemingly stolid, watched the scene. The twenty feet lessened to eighteen, to fifteen, and, turning his head, the man looked at his companion. Beautiful as she was, there now appeared to his eye an expression of anticipation, — anticipation of the end, anticipation of a death, — the death of a weaker animal!

A determination which had been only latent became positive with Blair. He urged on his horse to the uttermost and sprang past his companion. His right hand went to his hip and lingered there. His voice rang out above the sound of the horses' feet and of their breathing.

"Hi, there, Racer, Pacer!" he shouted. "Come here!"

There was no response from the hounds; no sign that they had heard him. They were within ten feet of the rabbit now, and no voice on earth could have stopped them.

"Pacer! Racer!" shouted Ben. There was a pause, and then the quick bark of a revolver. A puff of dust arose before the nose of the leading dog.

Again no response, only the steadily lessening distance.

For a second Ben Blair hesitated; but it was for a second only. Florence watched him, too surprised to speak, and saw what for a moment made her doubt her own eyes. The hand that held the big revolver was raised, there was a report, then another, and the two dead hounds went tumbling over and over with their own momentum upon the brown prairie. Beyond them the rabbit bounded away into distance and safety.

Without a word Ben Blair drew rein, returned the revolver to its holster, and came back to where the girl had stopped.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I'll pay you for the dogs, if you like." A pause and a straight glance from out the blue eyes. "I could n't help doing what I did."

Having in mind the look he had last seen upon the girl's face, he expected an explosion of wrath; but he was

destined to surprise. There was silence, instead, while two great tears gathered slowly in her soft eyes, and brimmed over upon the brown cheeks.

"I don't want you to pay for the dogs; I'm glad they're gone." She brushed back a straggling lock of hair. "It's a horrid sport, and I'll never have anything to do with it again." A look that set the youth's heart bounding shot out sideways from beneath the long lashes. "I'm very glad you did — what you did."

Just then the noisy old buckboard, with Rankin and Scotty clinging to the seat, drove up and stopped short, with a protest from every joint of the ancient vehicle.

CHAPTER X

THE DOMINANT ANIMAL

THE chance to sell his stock, ostensibly his reason for delaying departure, came to Scotty Baker much more quickly than he had anticipated. Within a week after the hunt — in the very first mail he received, in fact — came an offer from a Minneapolis firm to take every scrap of horse-flesh he could spare. With much compunction and a doleful face he read the letter aloud in the family council.

"That means 'go' for sure, I suppose," he commented at its conclusion.

Involuntarily Florence laughed. "You look as though you'd just got word that the whole herd had stampeded over a ravine, instead of having had a wave of good fortune," she bantered. "I believe you'd still back out if you could."

Scotty's face did not lighten. "I know I would," he admitted.

"We'll not give you the chance, though," broke in Mollie, with the first indication of enthusiasm she had shown in many a day. "Florence and I will begin packing right away, and you can carry the things along with you when you drive the horses to town."

Scotty looked at his wife steadily and caught the trace of excitement in her manner.

"Yes, that is a good suggestion," he replied slowly. "It 's liable to turn cold any time now, and as long as we 're going it may as well be before Winter sets in." He filled a stubby meerschaum pipe with tobacco, and put on cap and coat preparatory to going out of doors. "I spoke to Rankin about the place the other day," he added, "and he says he 'll take it and pay cash whenever I 'm ready. I 'll drive over and see him this morning."

Rankin was not at home — so Ma Graham told Scotty when he arrived — and probably he would n't return till afternoon; but Ben was around the barn somewhere, more than likely out among the broncos. He usually was, when he had nothing else in particular to do.

Following her direction the Englishman loitered out toward the stock quarters, looked with interest into the big sheds where the haying machinery was kept, stopped to listen to the rush of water through the four-inch pipe of the artesian well, lit his pipe afresh, and moved on reflectively to the first of the great stockyards that stretched beyond. A tight board fence, ten feet high, built as a windbreak on two sides, obstructed his way; and he started to walk around it. At the end the windbreak merged into a well-built fence of six wires, and, a wagon's breadth between, a long row of haystacks, built as a further protection against the wind. These, together with the wires, formed the third side of the yard. Leaning on the latter, Scotty looked into the enclosure, at first carelessly, then with interest. A moment later, without making his

presence known, he stepped back to the hay, and, selecting a pile of convenient height, sat down in the sunshine to watch.

What he saw was a tall slim young man, in chaparejos and sombrero, the inevitable "repeater" at his hip, solitarily engaged in the process of breaking a bronco. Ordinarily in this cattle-country the first time one of these wiry little ponies is ridden is on a holiday or a Sunday, whenever a company of spectators can be secured to assist or to applaud; but this was not Ben Blair's way. By nature solitary, whenever possible he did his work as he took his pleasure, unseen of men. At present, as he went methodically about his business, he had no idea that a person save Ma Graham was within miles, or that anyone anywhere had the slightest interest in what he was doing.

"Yard One," as the cowboys designated this corral, was the most used of any on the ranch. Save for a single stout post set solidly in its centre, it was entirely clear, and under the feet of hundreds of cattle had been tramped firm as a pavement. At present it contained a half-dozen horses, and one of these, a little mustang that was Ben's particular pride, he was just saddling when Scotty appeared; the others, a wild-eyed, evil-looking lot, scattering meantime as far as the boundaries of the corral would permit.

Very deliberately Ben mounted the pony, hitched up the legs of his leather trousers, folded back the brim of the big sombrero, and critically inspected the ponies before him. One of them, a demoniacal looking buckskin, appeared more vixenish than the others, and very promptly the youth made this selection; but to get in touch

of the wily little beast was another matter. Every time the rancher made a move forward the herd found it convenient likewise to move, and to the limit of the corral fence. Once clear around the yard the rider humored them; and Scotty, the spectator, felt sure he must be observed. But Ben never looked outside the fence.

Starting to make the circle a second time, the rancher spoke a single word to the little mustang and they moved ahead at a gallop. Instantly responsive, the herd likewise broke into a lope, maintaining their lead. Twice, three times, faster and faster, the rider and the riderless completed the circle, the hard ground ringing with the din, the dust rising in a filmy cloud; then of a sudden the figure on the mustang passed from inaction into motion, the left hand on the reins tightened and turned the pony's head to the side, straight across the diameter of the circle. Simultaneously the right dropped to the lariat coiled on the pummel of the saddle, loosed it, and swung the noose at the end freely in air. On galloped the broncos, unmindful of the trick — on around the limiting fence, until suddenly they found almost in their midst the animal, man, whom they so feared, whom they were trying so to escape. Then for a moment there was scattering, reversal, confusion, a denser cloud of dust; but for one of their number, the buckskin, it was too late. Ben Blair rose in his stirrups, the rawhide rope that had been circling above his sombrero shot out, spread, dropped over the uplifted yellow head. The little mustang the man rode recognized the song of the lariat; well he knew what would follow. In anticipation he stopped dead; his front legs stiffened.

There was a shock, a protest of straining leather which Scotty could hear clear beyond the corral, as, checked under speed, the buckskin rose on his hind-feet and all but lost his balance. That instant was Blair's opportunity. He turned his mustang swiftly and headed straight for the centre-post, dragging the struggling and half-strangled bronco; he rode around the post, sprang from the saddle, took a skilful half-hitch in the lariat — and the buckskin was a prisoner.

Scotty polished his glasses excitedly. He was wondering how the sleek young men with whom he would soon be mingling in the city would go at a job like that; and he smiled absently.

To "snub" the bronco up to the post so that he could scarcely turn his head was an easy matter. To exchange the bridle to the new mount was also comparatively simple. To adjust the great saddle, with the unwilling victim struggling like mad, was a more difficult task; but eventually all these came to pass, and Ben paused a moment to inspect his handiwork. To a tenderfoot observer it might have seemed that the battle was about over; but as a matter of fact it had scarcely begun. To chronicle on paper that a certain person on a certain day rode a certain bronco for the first time sounds commonplace; but to one who has seen the deviltry lurking in those wild prairie ponies' eyes, who knows their dogged fighting disposition, the reality is very different.

Only a moment Ben Blair paused. Almost before Scotty had got his spectacles back to his nose he saw the long figure spring into the saddle, observed that the lariat

which had held the bronco helpless to the post had been removed, and knew that the fight was on in earnest.

And emphatically it was on. With his first leap the pony went straight into the air, to come down with a mighty jolt, stiff-legged; but Ben Blair sat through it apparently undisturbed. If ever an animal showed surprise it was the buckskin then. For an instant he paused, looked back at the motionless rider with eyes that seemed almost green, then suddenly started away at full speed around the corral as though Satan himself were in pursuit.

Instantly with the diminutive horse swift anger took the place of surprise. Scotty, the spectator, could read it in the tightening of the rippling muscles beneath the skin, in the toss of the sleek head. Fear had passed long ago, if the little beast had ever really known the sensation. It was now merely animal against animal, dogged obstinacy against dogged tenacity, a fight until one or the other gave in, no quarter asked or accepted.

As before, the bronco was the aggressor. One by one, so swiftly that they formed a continuous movement, he tried all the tricks which instinct or ingenuity suggested. He bucked, his hind-quarters in the air until it seemed he would reverse. He reared up until his front feet were on the level of a man's head, until Scotty held his breath for fear the animal would lose his balance backward; but when he resumed the normal he found the man, ever relentless, firmly in place, impassively awaiting the next move. He grew more furious with each failure. The sweat oozed out in drops that became trickling streams beneath the short hair. His breath came more quickly,

whistling through the wide nostrils. A new light came into the gray-green eyes and flashed from them fiendishly. As suddenly as he had made his previous attacks he played his last trump. Like a ball of lead he dropped in his tracks and tried to roll; but the great saddle prevented, and when he sprang up again, there, as firmly seated as before, was the hated man upon his back.

Then overpowering and unreasoning anger, the wrath of a frenzied lion in a cage, of a baited bull in a ring, took possession of the buckskin. He went through his tricks anew, not methodically as before, but furiously, desperately. The sweat churned into foam beneath the saddle and between his legs. He screamed like a demon, until the other broncos retreated in terror, and Scotty's hair fairly lifted on his head. But one idea possessed him — to kill this being on his back, this hated thing he could not move or dislodge. A suggestion of means came to him, and straight as a line he made for the high board fence. There was no misunderstanding his purpose.

Then for the first time Ben Blair roused himself. The hand on the rein tightened, as the lariat had tightened, until the small head with the dainty ears curled back in a half-circle. Simultaneously the long rowels of a spur bit deep into the foaming flank, the swish of a quirt sounded keenly, a voice broke out in one word of command, "Whoa!" and repeated, "Whoa!"

It was like thunder out of a clear sky, like an unseen blow in the dark. Within three feet of the fence the bronco stopped and stood trembling in every muscle, expecting he knew not what.

It was the man's time now — the beginning of the end.

"Get up!" repeated the same authoritative voice, and the hand on the bit loosened. "Get up!" and rowel and quirt again did their work.

In terror this time the bronco plunged ahead, felt the guiding rein, and started afresh around the circle of the corral fence. "Get up!" repeated Ben, and like a streak of yellowish light they spun about the trail. Round and round they went, the body of the man and horse alike tilted in at an angle, the other ponies plunging to clear the way. Scotty counted ten revolutions; then he awaited the end. It was not long in coming. Of a sudden, as before, directly in front of where he sat, the bridle-reins tightened, and he heard the one word, "Whoa!" and pony and rider stopped like figures in clay. For a moment they stood motionless, save for their labored breathing; then very deliberately Ben Blair dismounted. Not a movement did the buckskin make, either of offence or to escape; he merely waited. Still deliberately, the man removed the saddle and bridle, while not a muscle of the bronco's body stirred. Scotty watched the scene in fascination. Every trace of anger was out of the pony's gray-green eyes now, every indication of terror as well. Dozens of horses the Englishman had seen broken; but one like this — never before. It was as though in the last few minutes an understanding had come about between this fierce wild thing and its conqueror; as though, like every human being with whom he came in contact, the latter had dominated by the sheer strength of his will. It was all but uncanny.

Slowly Blair laid the bridle beside the saddle, and stepping over to his late mount he patted the damp neck and gently stroked the silken muzzle.

"I think, old boy, you 'll remember me when we meet again," Scotty heard him say. "Good luck to you meantime," and with a last pat he picked up his riding paraphernalia and started for the sheds.

Scotty stood up. "Hello," he called.

Ben halted and turned about, looking his surprise.

"Well, in the name of all that 's proper!" he ejaculated slowly; "where 'd you drop down from?"

Scotty smiled broadly; frank admiration for the dusty cowboy was in his gaze.

"I did n't drop down at all; I walked around here about half an hour ago. You were rather preoccupied at the time and did n't notice me."

Blair came back to the fence and swung over the saddle and bridle. "You took in the whole show then?" he asked. A trace of color came into his face, as he vaulted over the rails. "I hope you enjoyed it."

Scotty observed the latest feat, unconscious as its predecessor, with augmented admiration. "I certainly did," he said, and the subject was dropped.

The two men walked together toward the ranch-house.

"I came over to see Rankin," remarked the Englishman, "but I 'm afraid I 'll have to wait a bit."

"I guess you will," replied Ben. "He went up to the north well this morning. They 're building some sheds up there, and he 's superintending the job. He 's as liable to forget about dinner as not. Nothing I can do for you, is there?"

Scotty thrust his hands into his pockets.

"No, I guess not. I came over to see about selling him my place. We're going to leave in a few days."

Ben Blair made no comment, and for a moment they walked on in silence; then an idea suddenly occurred to the Englishman.

"Come to think of it," he said, "there is something you can do for me. Bill and I have got to drive all the stock over to the station. I'd be a thousand times obliged if you would help us."

For a half-dozen steps Blair did not answer; then he turned fairly to his companion.

"You won't be offended if I refuse?" he asked.

"No, certainly not."

"Well, then, I don't want to help you myself, but I'll get Grannis to go with you. He'll be just as useful."

Ordinarily, despite his assertion to the contrary, Scotty would have been offended; but he knew this long youth quite too well to misunderstand.

"Would you mind telling me why you refuse?" he said at last.

Ben shifted the heavy saddle to his other shoulder.

"No, I don't mind," he said bluntly. "I won't help you because I don't want you to go."

Scotty pondered, and a light dawned on his slow-moving brain. He looked at Ben sympathetically. "My boy," he said, "I'm sorry for you; by Jove! I am."

They were even with the horse-barn now, and without a word Ben went in and hung up the saddle, each stirrup

upon a nail. Relieved of his load he came back, slapping the dust from his clothes with his big gauntlets.

"If it 's a fair question," he asked, "why do I merit your sympathy?"

The Englishman's hands went deeper into his pockets.

"Why?" He all but stared. "Because you have n't a ghost of a chance with Florence. She 'd laugh at you!"

Ben's blue eyes were raised to a level with the other's glasses. "She 'd laugh at me, you think?" he asked quietly.

Scotty shifted uneasily. "Well, perhaps not that," he retracted, "but anyway, you have n't a chance. I like you, Ben, and I 'm dead sorry that she is different. She comes, if I do say it, of a good family, and you —" of a sudden the Englishman found himself floundering in deep water.

"And I am — an unknown," Ben finished for him.

At that moment Scotty heartily wished himself elsewhere, but wishing did not help him. "Yes, to put it baldly, that 's the word. It 's unfortunate, damned unfortunate, but true, you know."

Ben's eyes did not leave the other man's face. "You 've talked with her, have you?" he asked.

Scotty fidgeted more than before, and swore silently that in future he would keep his compassions to himself.

"No, I 've never thought it necessary so far; but of course —"

Ben Blair lifted his head. "Don't worry, Mr. Baker, I 'll tell her my pedigree myself. I supposed she already knew — that everybody who had ever heard of me knew."

Scotty forgot his nervousness. "You 'll — tell her yourself, you say?"

"Certainly."

The Englishman said nothing. It seemed to him there was nothing to say.

For a moment there was silence. "Mr. Baker," said Blair at last, "as long as we 've started on this subject I suppose we might as well finish it up. I love your daughter; that you 've guessed. If I can keep her here, I 'll do so. It 's my right; and if there 's a God who watches over us, He knows I 'll do my best to make her happy. As to my mother, I 'll tell her about that myself — and consider the matter closed."

Again there was silence. As before, there seemed to the Englishman nothing to say.

Blair turned toward the ranch-house. "I saw Ma Graham motioning for dinner quite a while ago," he said. "Let 's go in and eat."

CHAPTER XI

LOVE'S AVOWAL

A DISTINCT path, in places almost a beaten road, connected the ⌊R and the Baker ranches. Along it a tall slim youth was riding a buckskin pony. He was clean-shaven and clean-shirted; but the shirt was of rough brown flannel. His leather trousers were creased and baggy at the knees. At his hip protruded the butt of a big revolver. Upon his head, seemingly a load in itself, was a broad sombrero; and surrounding it, beneath a band which at one time had been very gaudy but was now sobered by sun and rain, were stuck a score or more of matches. Despite the motion of the horse the youth was steadily smoking a stubby bulldog pipe.

The time was morning, early morning; it was Winter, and the sun was still but a little way up in the sky. The day, although the month was December, was as warm as September. There had not even been a frost the previous night. Mother Nature was indulging in one of her many whims, and seemed smiling broadly at the incongruity.

Though the rider was out thus early, his departure had been by no means surreptitious. "I 'm going over to Baker's, and may not be back before night," he had said at the breakfast table; and, impassive as usual, the older

man had made no comment, but simply nodded and went about his work. Likewise there was no subterfuge when the youth arrived at his destination. "I came to see Florence," he announced to Scotty in the front yard; then, as he tied the pony, he added: "I spoke to Grannis, and he said he 'd come over and help you. Do you know exactly when you 'll want him?"

"Yes, day after to-morrow. This weather is too good to waste."

Ben turned toward the house. "All right. I 'll see that he 's over here bright and early."

The visitor found the interior of the Baker home looking like a corner in a storage warehouse. Florence, in a big checked apron reaching to her chin, her sleeves rolled up to her elbows, was busily engaged in still further dismantling the once cosey parlor. Amidst the confusion, and apparently a part of it, Mrs. Baker wandered aimlessly about. The front door was wide open, letting in a stream of sunlight.

"Good-morning," said Ben, appearing in the doorway.

Mrs. Baker stopped long enough to nod, and Florence looked up from her work.

"Good-morning," she replied. A deliberate glance took in the new-comer's dress from head to foot, and lingered on the exposed revolver hilt. "Are you hunting Indians or bear?"

Ben Blair returned the look, even more deliberately.

"Bear, I judge from the question. I came in search of you."

There was no answer, and the man came in and sat

down on the corner of a box. "You seem to be very busy," he said.

The girl went on with her packing. "Yes, rather busy," she said indifferently.

Ben dangled one long leg over the side of the box.

"Are you too busy to take a ride with me? I want to talk with you."

"I 'm pretty busy," non-committally.

"Suppose I should ask it as a favor?"

"Suppose I should decline?"

The long leg stopped its swinging. "You would n't, though."

The girl's brown eyes flashed. "How do you know I would n't?"

Ben stood up and folded his arms. "Because it would be the first favor I ever asked of you, and you would n't refuse that."

They eyed each other a moment.

"Where do you want to go?" temporized Florence.

"Anywhere, so it 's with you."

"You don't want to stay long?"

"I 'll come back whenever you say."

Florence rolled down her sleeves and sighed with assumed regret. "I ought to stay here and work."

"I 'll help you when we come back, if you like."

"Very well." She said it hesitatingly.

"All right. I 'll get your horse ready for you."

Scotty watched them peculiarly, Molly doubtfully, as they rode out of the ranch yard; but neither made any comment, and they moved away in silence.

"That 's an odd looking pony you 've got there," remarked the girl critically, when they had turned into the half-beaten trail which led south. "How does it happen you 're on him instead of the other?"

Ben patted the smooth neck before him, and the pony twitched his ears appreciatively.

"Buckskin and I had the misfortune not to meet until lately. We just got acquainted a few days ago."

The girl glanced at her companion quickly and caught the look upon his face.

"I believe you 're fonder of your horses and cattle and things than you are of people," she flashed.

The man's hand continued patting the pony's yellow neck.

"More fond than I am of some people, maybe you meant to say."

"Perhaps so," she conceded.

"Yes, I think I am," he admitted. "They 're more worthy. They never abuse a kindness, and never come down to the insult of class distinctions. They 're the same to-day, to-morrow, a year from now. They 'll work themselves to death for you, instead of sacrificing you to their personal gain. Yes, they make better friends than some people."

Florence smiled as she glanced at her companion.

"Is that what you want to tell me? If it is, seeing I 've just made my choice and decided to return to civilization and mingle with human beings of whom you have such a poor opinion, I think we may as well go back. Mamma and I have been racking our brains for two days

to find a place for the china, and I've just thought of one."

Blair was silent a moment; then he said, "I promised to return whenever you wished, but I've not said what I wanted to say yet."

Florence looked at the speaker with feigned surprise. "Is that so? I'm very curious to hear!"

Ben returned the look deliberately. "You'd like to hear now what I have to say?"

The girl's breath came more quickly, but she persisted in her banter. "I can scarcely wait!"

The line of the youth's big jaw tightened. "I won't keep you in suspense any longer then. First of all, I want to relate a little personal history. I was eight years old, as you know, when I was taken into the ⌊R ranch. In those eight years, as far as I can remember, not one person except Mr. Rankin ever called at my mother's home."

Again the girl felt a thrill of anticipation, but the brown eyes opened archly. "You must have kept a big fierce dog, or — or something."

"No, that was not the reason."

"I can't imagine what it could be, then."

"The explanation is simple. My mother and Tom Blair were never married."

Swiftly the color mounted into Florence's cheeks, and she drew up her horse with a jerk.

"So that is what you brought me out here to tell me!" she blazed.

Ben drew up likewise, and wheeled his pony facing hers.

"I beg your pardon, but I'm not to blame for the way

I told you — of myself. You forced it. For once in my life at least, Florence, I 'm in dead earnest to-day."

The girl hesitated. Tears of anger, or of something else, came into her eyes. "I 'm going home," she announced briefly, and turned back the way they had come.

The man silently wheeled his buckskin and for five minutes, ten minutes, they rode toward home together.

"Florence," said the youth steadily, "I had something more I wished to say to you; will you listen?"

No answer — only the sound of the solid steps of the thoroughbred and the daintier tread of the mustang.

"Florence," he repeated, "I asked you a question."

The girl's face was turned away. "Oh, you are cruel!" she said.

Ben touched his pony, advanced, caught the bridle of the girl's horse, and brought both to a standstill. The girl did not turn her head to look at him, but she did not resist. Deliberately the man dismounted, loosed the rolled blanket he carried back of his saddle, spread it upon the ground, then looked fairly up into her brown eyes.

"Florence," he said, as he held out his hand to assist her to dismount, "I 've something I wish very much to say to you. Won't you listen?"

Florence Baker looked steadily down into the clear blue eyes. Why she did not refuse she could not have told, could never tell. As well as she knew her own name she realized what was coming — what it was the man wished to say to her; but she did not refuse to listen.

"Florence," he said gently, "I 'm waiting," and as in a

dream she stepped into the proffered hand, felt herself lowered to the ground, followed the young man over to the blanket, and sat down. The sun, now high above them, shone down warmly and approvingly. Scarcely a breath of air was stirring. Not a sound came from over the prairies. As completely as though they were the only two people on the earth, they were alone.

The man stretched himself at his companion's feet, where he could look into her face and catch its every expression.

"Florence Baker," his voice came to her ears like the sound of one speaking afar off, "Florence Baker, I love you. In all that I 'm going to say, bear this in mind; don't forget it for a moment. To me you will always be the one woman on earth. Why I have n't told you this before, why I waited until you were passing from my life before I said it, I don't know; but now I 'm as sure as that I 'm looking at you that it is so." The blue eyes never shifted. Presently one big strong hand reached over and enfolded within its grasp another tiny resistless hand, which lay there passive.

"You 're getting ready to go away, Florence," he went on, "leaving this country where you 've spent almost your life, changing it for an uncertainty. Don't do it — not for my sake, but for your own. You know nothing of the city, its pleasures, its rush, its excitement, its ambitions. Granted that you 've been there, that we 've both been there; but we were only children then and could n't see beneath the thinnest surface. Yet there must be something beneath the glitter, something you 've never thought

of and cannot realize; something which makes the life hateful to those who have felt and known it. I don't know what it is, you don't; but it must be there. If it weren't so, why would men like your father, like Mr. Rankin, college men, men of wealth, men who have seen the world, leave the city and come here to stay? They were born in cities, raised in cities. The life was a part of their life; but they left it, and are glad." The man clasped the little hand more tightly, shook it gently. "Florence, are you listening?"

"Yes, I'm listening."

"I repeat then, don't go. You belong here. This life is your life. Everything that is best for your happiness you will find here. You spoke the other day of your birthright — to love and to be loved — as though this could only be realized in a city. Do you think I don't care for you as much as though my home were in a town?"

Passive, motionless, Florence listened, feeling the subtle sympathy which ever existed between her and this boy-man drawing them closer together. His strong magnetism, never before so potent, gripped her almost like a physical force. His personality, original, masterful, convincing, fascinated her. For the time the tacit consent of her position never occurred to her. It seemed but natural and fitting that he should hold her hand. She had no desire to speak or move, merely to listen.

"Florence," the voice was very near now, and very low. "Florence, I love you. I can't have you go away, can't have you pass out of my life. I'll do anything for you, — live for you, die for you, fight for you, slave for

you, — anything but give you up." Of a sudden his arms were about her, his lips touched her cheek. "Can't you love me in return? Speak to me, tell me — for I love you, Florence!"

The girl started, and drew away involuntarily. "Oh, don't, don't! please don't!" she pleaded. The dream faded, and she awoke to the reality of her position. The brown head bowed, dropped into her hands. Her whole body shook. "Oh, what have I done!" she sobbed. "Oh, what have I done! Oh — oh — oh —"

For a time, neither of them realized nor cared how long, they sat side by side, though separate now. Warmly and brightly as before, the sun shone down upon them. A breath of breeze, born of the heated earth, wandered gently over the land. The big thoroughbred shifted on its feet and whinnied suggestively.

Gradually the girl's hysterical weeping grew quieter. The sobs came less frequently, and at last ceased. Ben Blair slowly arose, folded his arms, and waited. Another minute passed. Florence Baker, the storm over, glanced up at her companion — at first hesitatingly, then openly and soberly. She stood up, almost at his side; but he did not turn. Awe, contrition, strange feelings and emotions flooded her anew. She reached out her hand and touched him on the arm; at first hesitatingly, then boldly, she leaned her head against his shoulder.

"Ben," she pleaded, "Ben, forgive me. I've hurt you terribly; but I didn't mean to. I am as I am; I can't help it. I can't promise to do what you ask — can't say I love you now, or promise to love you in the

future." She looked up into his face. "Won't you forgive me?"

Still the man did not turn. "There's nothing to forgive, Florence," he said sadly. "I misunderstood it all."

"But there is something for me to say," she went on swiftly. "I knew from the first what you were going to tell me, and knew I could n't give you what you asked; yet I let you think differently. It 's all my fault, Ben, and I 'm so sorry!" She gently and timidly stroked the shoulder of the rough flannel shirt. "I should have stopped you, and told you my reasons; but they seemed so weak, and somehow I could n't help listening to you." There was a hesitating pause. "Would you like to hear my reasons now?"

"Just as you please." There was no unkindness in the voice — only resignation and acceptance of the hard fact she had already made known to him.

Florence hesitated. A catch came into her throat, and she dropped her head to the broad shoulder as before.

"Ben, Ben!" she almost sobbed, "I can't tell you, after all. It 'll only hurt you again."

He was looking out over the prairies, watching the heat-waves that arose in fantastic circles, as in Spring. "You can't hurt me again," he said wearily.

The vague feeling of irreparable loss gripped the girl anew; but this time she rushed on desperately, in spite of it. "Oh, why could n't I have met you somewhere else, under different circumstances?" she wailed. "Why could n't your mother have been — different?" She paused, the brown head raised, the loosened hair tossed

back in abandon. "Maybe, as you say, it 's a rainbow I 'm seeking. Maybe I 'll be sorry; but I can't help it. I want them all — the things of civilization. I want them all," she finished abruptly.

Gently the man disengaged himself. "Is that all you wished to say?"

"Yes," hesitatingly, "I guess that 's all."

Ben picked up the blanket and returned it to his saddle; then he led the horse to the girl's side. "Can I help you up?"

His companion nodded. The youth held down his hand, and upon it Florence mounted to the saddle as she had done many times before. The thought came to her that it might be the last time.

Not a word did Ben speak as they rode back to the ranch-house; not once did he look at his companion. At the door he held out his hand.

"Good-bye," he said simply.

"Good-bye," she echoed feebly.

Ben made his adieu to Mrs. Baker, and then rode out to the barn where Scotty was working. "Good-bye," he repeated. "We 'll probably not meet again before you go." The expression upon the Englishman's face caught his eye. "Don't," he said. "I 'd rather not talk now."

Scotty gripped the extended hand and shook it heartily.

"Good-bye," he said, with misty eyes.

The youth wheeled the buckskin and headed for home. Florence and her mother were still standing in the doorway watching him, and he lifted his big sombrero; but he did not glance at them, nor turn his head in passing.

CHAPTER XII

A DEFERRED RECKONING

TIME had dealt kindly with the saloon of Mick Kennedy. A hundred electric storms had left it unscathed. Prairie fires had passed it by. Only the relentless sun and rain had fastened the mark of their handiwork upon it and stained it until it was the color of the earth itself. Within, man had performed a similar office. The same old cottonwood bar stretched across the side of the room, taking up a third of the available space; but no stranger would have called it cottonwood now. It had become brown like oak from continuous saturation with various colored liquids; and upon its surface, indelible record of the years, were innumerable bruises and dents where heavy bottles and glasses had made their impress under impulse of heavier hands. The continuous deposit of tobacco smoke had darkened the ceiling, modulating to a lighter tone on the walls. The place was even gloomier than before, and immeasurably filthier under the accumulated grime of a dozen years. Once in their history the battered tables had been recovered, but no one would have guessed it now. The gritty decks of cards had been often replaced, but from their appearance they might have been those with which Tom Blair long ago bartered away his honor.

Time had left its impress also on bartender Mick. A generous sprinkling of gray was in his hair; the single eye was redder and fiercer, seeming by its blaze to have consumed the very lashes surrounding it; the cheeks were sunken, the great jaw and chin prominent from the loss of teeth. Otherwise Mick was not much changed. The hand which dealt out his wares, which insisted on their payment to the last nickel, was as steady as of yore. His words were as few, his control of the reckless and often drunken frequenters was as perfect. He was the personified spirit of the place — crafty, designing, relentless.

Bob Hoyt, the foreman, shambled into Mick's lair at the time of day when the lights were burning and smoking on the circling shelf. He peered through the haze of tobacco smoke at the patrons already present, received a word from one and a stare from another, but from none an invitation to join the circle.

Bob sidled up to the bar where Kennedy was impassively waiting. "Warmer out," he advanced.

Mick made no comment. "Something?" he suggested.

Bob's colorless eyes blinked involuntarily. "Yes, a bit of rye."

Mick poured a very small drink into a whiskey glass, set it with another of water before the customer, on a big card tacked upon the wall added a fresh line to those already succeeding the other's name, and leaned his elbows once more upon the bar.

Upon the floor of his mouth Bob Hoyt laid a foundation of water, over this sent down the fiery liquor with a gulp,

and followed the retreat with the last of the water, unconsciously making a wry face.

Kennedy whisked the empty glasses through the doubtful contents of a convenient pail, and set them dripping upon a perforated shelf. "Found the horses yet?" he queried, in an undertone.

Bob shifted uncomfortably and searched for a place for his hands, but finding none he let them hang awkwardly over the rail of the bar.

"No, not even a trail."

"Looked, have you?" The single searchlight turned unwinkingly upon the other's face.

"Yes, I've been out all day. Made a circle of the places within forty miles — Russel's of the ®, Stetson's of the 'XI,' Frazier's, Rankin's — none of them have seen a sign of a stray."

"That settles it, then. Those horses were stolen." The red face with its bristle of buff and gray came closer. "I did n't think they 'd strayed. The two best horses on a ranch don't wander off by chance; if they 'd been broncos it might have been different. It 's the same thing as three years ago; pretty nearly the same date too — early in January it was, you remember!"

Bob's long head nodded confirmation. "Yes. We thought then they 'd come around all right in the next round up, but they did n't, and never have."

Kennedy stepped back, spread his hands palm down upon the bar, leaned his full weight upon them, and gazed meditatively at the other occupants of the room. A question was in his mind. Should he take these men into

his confidence and trust to their well-known method of dealing with rustlers — a method very effective when successful in catching the offender, but infinitely deficient in finesse — or depend wholly upon his own ingenuity? He decided that in this instance the latter offered little hope. His province was in dealing with people at close range.

"Boys," — his voice was normal, but not a man in the room failed to give attention, — "boys, line up! It 's on the house."

Promptly the card games ceased. In one, the pot lay as it was, its ownership undecided, in the centre of the table. The loungers' feet dropped to the floor. An inebriate, half dozing in the corner, awoke. Well they knew it was for no small reason that Mick interrupted their diversions. Up they came — Grover of the far-away "XXX" ranch, who had been here for two days now, and had lost the price of a small herd; Gilbert of the "Lost Range," whose brand was a circle within a circle; Stetson of the "XI," a short heavy-set man, with an immovable pugilist's face, to-night, as usual, ahead of the game; Thompson, one-armed but formidable, who drove the stage and kept the postoffice and inadequate general store just across to the north of the saloon; McFadden, a wiry little Scotchman with sandy whiskers, Rankin's nearest neighbor to the south; a half-dozen lesser lights, in distinction from the big ranchers called by their first names, "Buck" or "Pete" or "Bill" as the case might be, mere cowmen employed at a salary. Elbow to elbow they leaned upon the supporting bar, awaiting with interest the something they knew Kennedy had to say.

Kennedy did not ask a single man what he would have. It was needless. Silently he placed a glass before each, and starting a bottle of red liquor at one end of the line, he watched it, as, steadily emptying, it passed on down to the end.

"I never use it, you know," he explained, as, the preparation complete, they looked at him expectantly.

"Take something else, then," pressed McFadden.

Mick poured out a glass of water and set it on the bar before him; but not an observer smiled. They knew the man they were dealing with.

"All right, boys," — McFadden's glass went up on a level with his eye, and one and all the others followed the motion, — "all right, boys! Here's to you, Kennedy!" — mouthing the last word as though it were a hot pebble, and in unison the dozen odd hands led the way to their respective owners' mouths. There was a momentary pause; then a musical clinking, as the empty glasses returned to the board. Silence, expectant silence, returned.

"Boys," — Mick looked from face to face intimately, — "we've got work ahead. Hoyt here reported this morning that two of the best horses on the Big B were missing. He's made a forty-mile circuit to-day, and no one has seen anything of them. You all know what that means."

Stetson turned to the foreman. "What time did you see them last, Hoyt?"

"About nine last evening."

"Sure?"

Bob's long head nodded emphatically. "Yes, one of the boys had the team out mending fence in the afternoon,

and when he was through he turned them into the corral with the broncos. I 'm sure they were there."

"I 'm not surprised," commented Thompson, swinging on his single elbow to face the others. "It 's been some time now since we 've had a necktie party and it 's bound to come. The wonder is it has n't come before."

Gilbert and Grover, comparatively elderly men, said nothing, looked nothing; but upon the faces of the half-dozen cowboys there appeared distinct anticipation. The hunt of a "rustler" appealed to them as a circus does to a small boy, as the prospect of a football game does to a college student.

Meanwhile, McFadden had been thinking. One could always tell when this process was taking place with the Scotchman, from his habit of tapping his chest with his middle finger as though beating time to the movement of his mental machinery.

"Got any plan, Kennedy?" he queried. "Whoever 's done you has got a good start by this time; but if we 're going to do anything, there 's no use in giving him longer. How about it?"

Mick's single eye shifted as before, and went from face to face. "No, I have n't; but I 've got an idea." A pause. "How many of you boys remembers Tom Blair?" he digressed.

"I do," said Grover.

"Same here." It was Gilbert of the Lost Range who spoke.

"I 've heard of him," commented one of the cowboys.

"I guess we all have," added another.

Again Mick's eye, like a flashlight, passed from man to man.

"Well," he announced, "I may be wrong, but I've got reason to believe it was Tom Blair who did the job last night, and that he's somewhere this side the river right now."

For a moment there was silence, while the idea took root.

"I supposed he was dead long ago," remarked Stetson at last.

"So did I, until a month ago — until the last time I was in town stocking up. I met a fellow there then from the country west of the river, and it all came out. Blair's been stampin' that range for a year, and they're suspicious of him. He disappears every now and then, and they think he keeps in with a gang of rustlers who have their headquarters over in the Johnson's Hole country in Wyoming. The fellow said he kept up appearances by claiming he owned a ranch on this side — the Big B. That's how we came to speak of him."

"Queer," commented Stetson, "that if it's Blair, he hasn't been around before. It's been ten years now since he disappeared, hasn't it?"

"More than that," corrected Mick. "That's another reason I believe it's him; that, and the fact that I didn't do nothin' the last time I was held up. It must be one lone rustler who's operating or there'd be more'n a couple of hosses missing. Then it must be some feller that knows the Big B, and has a particular grudge against it, or why would they have passed the Broken Kettle or the

Lone Buffalo on the west? Morris has a whole herd, and his main hoss sheds are in an old creek-bed a mile away from the ranch-house. I tell you it's some feller who knows this country and knows me."

"I believe you're right about him being this side of the river," broke in Thompson. "When I was over after the mail two days ago there was water running on the ice; and it's been warmer since. It must be wide open in spots now. A man who knows the crossings might make it afoot, but he could n't take a hoss over."

Mick's lone eye burned more ominously than before. "Of course he can't. He's run into a trap, and all we've got to do is to make a spread and round him up. I'll bet a hundred to one we find him somewhere this side, waiting for a freeze." Again the half-emptied bottle came from the shelf and passed to the end of the line. "Have another whiskey on me, boys."

They silently drank. Then grim Stetson suggested that they drink again — "to our success"; and cowboy Buck, not to be outdone, proposed another toast — "to the neck-tie party — after." The big bottle, empty now, dinned on the surface of the bar.

"By God! I hope we get him," flamed Grover. "He ought to be hung, anyway. He killed his wife and burned up the body, they say, before he left!"

"Someone must call for Rankin and Ben," suggested another, "Ben particularly. He ought to be there at the finish. Lord knows he's got grudge enough."

"We'll let him pull the trap," broke in Stetson grimly.

Of a sudden above the confusion there sounded a snarl,

almost like the cry of an animal. Surprised, for the moment silenced, the men turned in the direction whence it had come.

"Rankin!" It was Mick Kennedy who spoke, but it was Mick transformed. "Rankin!" The great veins of the bartender's neck swelled; the red face congested until it became all but purple. "No! We won't go near him! He'd put a stop to the whole thing. What we want is men, not cowards!"

A moment only the silence lasted. "All right," agreed Stetson. "Have another, boys! We'll drop Rankin!"

Anew, louder than before, broke forth the confusion. The games of a short time ago were forgotten. A heap of coin lay on the shelf behind the bar where Mick, the banker, had placed it; but winner and loser alike ignored its existence. The savage, ever so near the surface of these rough frontiersmen, had taken complete possession of them. Drop Rankin — forget civilization — ignore the slow practices of law and order!

"Come on!" someone yelled. "We're enough to do the business. To the river!"

Instantly the crowd burst through the single front door. Momentarily there followed a lull, while in the half darkness each rider found his mount. Then sounded an "All ready!" from cowboy Buck, first in motion, a straining of leather, a swish of quirts, a grunting of ponies as the spurs dug into their flanks, a rush of leaping feet, a wild medley of yells, and westward across the prairie, beneath the stars, there passed a swiftly moving black shadow that grew momentarily lighter, and back from which came a patter,

patter, patter, that grew softer and softer; until at last over the old saloon and its companion store fell silence absolute.

It was 10:28 when they left Kennedy's place. It was 12:36 when, without having for a moment stopped their long swinging gallop, they pulled up at the "Lone Buffalo" ranch, twenty-five miles away, and the last ranch before they reached the river. The house was dark and silent as the grave at their approach; but it did not remain so long. The display of fireworks with which they illumined the night would have done credit to an Independence Day celebration. The yells which accompanied it were hair-raising as the shrieks from a band of maniacs. Instantly lights began to burn, and the proprietor himself, Grey — a long Southerner with an imperial — came rushing to the door, a revolver in either hand.

But the visitors had not waited for him. With one impulse they had ridden straight into the horse corral, had thrown off saddles and bridles from their steaming mounts, and, every man for himself, had chosen afresh from the ranch herd. Passing out in single-file through the gate, they came upon Grey; but still they did not stop. The one word "rustler" was sufficient password, and not five minutes from the time they arrived they were again on the way, headed straight southwest for their long ride to the river.

Hour after hour they forged ahead. The mustangs had long since puffed themselves into their second wind, and, falling instinctively into their steady swinging lope, they moved ahead like machines. The country grew more and

more rolling, even hilly. From between the tufts of buffalo grass now and then protruded the white face of a rock. Over one such, all but concealed in the darkness, Grover's horse stumbled, and with a groan, the rancher beneath, fell flat to earth. By a seeming miracle the man arose, but the horse did not, and an examination showed the jagged edge of a fractured bone protruding through the hide at the shoulder. There was but one thing to do. A revolver spoke its message of relief, a hastily-cast lot fell to McFadden, and without a word he faced his own mount back the way they had come, assisted Grover to a place behind him, turned to wish the others good luck, and found himself already too late. Where a minute ago they had been standing there was now but vacancy. The night and the rolling ground had swallowed the avengers up as completely as though they had never existed; and the Scotchman rode slowly back.

It was yet dark, but the eastern sky was reddening, when they reached the chain of bluffs bordering the great river. They had made their plans before, so that now without hesitating they split as though upon the edge of a mighty wedge, half to the right, half to the left, each division separating again into its individual members, until the whole, like two giant hands whereof the cowboys, half a mile apart from each other, were the fingers, moved forward until the end finger all but touched the river itself.

Still there was no pause. The details had been worked out to a nicety. They had bent far to the south, miles farther than any man aiming at the Wyoming border

would have gone, and now, having arrived at the barrier, they wheeled north again. It was getting daylight, and cowboy Pete,—in our simile the left little finger,—first to catch sight of the surface of the stream, waved in triumph to the nearest rider on his right.

"We've got him, sure!" he yelled. "She's open in spots"; and though the others could not hear, they understood the meaning, and the message went on down the line.

On, on, more swiftly now, at a stiff gallop, for it was day, the riders advanced. As they moved, first one rider and then another would disappear, as a depression in the uneven country temporarily swallowed them up — but only to reappear again over a prominent rise, still galloping on. They watched each other closely now, searching the surrounding country. They were nearing a region where they might expect action at any moment,—the remains of a camp-fire, a clue to him they sought,—for it was on a line directly west of the Big B ranch.

And they were not to be disappointed. Observing closely, Stetson, who was nearest to Pete, saw the latter suddenly draw up his horse and come to a full stop. At last the end had arrived—at last; and the rancher turned to motion to his right. Only a moment the action took, but when he shifted back he saw a sight which, stolid gambler as he was, sent a thrill through his nerves, a mumbling curse to his lips. Coming toward him, crazy-scared, bounding like an antelope, mane flying, stirrups flapping, was the pony Pete had ridden, but now riderless. Of the cowboy himself there was not a sign. Stetson had not

heard a sound or caught a motion. Nevertheless, he understood. Somewhere near, just to the west, lay death, death in ambush; but he did not hesitate. Whatever his faults, the man was no coward. A revolver in either hand, the reins in his teeth, he spurred straight for the river.

It took him but a minute to cover the distance — a minute until, almost by the river's bank, he saw ahead on the brown earth the sprawling form of a dead man. With a jerk he drew up alongside, and, the muzzles of big revolvers following his eye, sent swiftly about him a sweeping glance. Of a sudden, three hundred yards out, seemingly from the surface of the river itself, he caught a tiny rising puff of smoke, heard simultaneously a sound he knew so well, — the dull spattering impact of a bullet, — realized that the pony beneath him was sinking, felt the shock as his own body came to earth, and heard just over his head the singing passage of a rifle-ball.

Unconscious profanity flowed from the rancher's lips in a stream; but meanwhile his brain worked swiftly, and, freeing himself, he crawled back hand over hand until a wave in the ground covered the river from view; then springing to his feet he ran toward the others, approaching now as fast as spurs would bring them, waving, shouting a warning as he went. Within a minute they were all together listening to his story. Within another, the rifles from off their saddles in their hands, the ponies left in charge of lank Bob Hoyt, the eight others now remaining moved back as Stetson had come: at first upright, then, crawling, hand over hand until, peeping over the intervening ridge, they saw lying before them the mingled ice

patches and open running water of the low-lying Missouri. Beside them at their left, very near, was the body of Pete; but after a first glance and an added invective no man for the present gave attention. He was dead, dead in his tracks, and their affair was not with such, but with the quick.

At first they could see nothing which explained the mystery of death, only the forbidding face of the great river; then gradually to one after another there appeared tell-tale marks which linked together into clues.

"Ain't that a hoss-carcass?" It was cowboy Buck who spoke. "Look, a hundred yards out, down stream."

Gilbert's swift glance caught the indicated object.

"Yes, and another beyond — farther down — amongst that ice-pack! Do you see?"

"Where?" Mick Kennedy trained his one eye like a fieldpiece upon the locality suggested. "Where? Yes! I see them now — both of them. Blair's own horse, if he had one, is probably in there too, somewhere."

Meanwhile Stetson had been scrutinizing the spot on the river's face from which had come the puff of smoke.

"Say, boys!" a ring as near excitement as was possible to one of his temperament was in his voice. "Ain't that an island, that brown patch out there, pretty well over to the other side? I believe it is."

The others followed his glance. Near the farther bank was a long low-lying object, like a jam of broken ice-cakes, between which and them the open water was flowing. At first they thought it was ice; then under longer observation they knew better. They had seen too many other

formations of the kind in this shifting treacherous stream to be long deceived. A flat sandy island it was, sure enough; and what they thought was ice was driftwood.

Almost simultaneously from the eight there burst forth an exclamation, a rumbling curse of comprehension. They understood it all now as plainly as though their own eyes had seen the tragedy. Blair had reached the river and, despite its rotten ice, had tried to cross. One by one the horses had broken through, had been abandoned to their fate. He alone, somehow, had managed to reach this sandy island, and he was there now, intrenched behind the driftwood, waiting and watching.

In the brain of every cowboy there formed an unuttered curse. Their impotence to go farther, to mete out retribution to this murderer of their companion, came over them in a blind wave of fury. The sun, now well above the horizon, shone warmly down upon them. They were in the midst of an infrequent Winter thaw. The full current of the river was between them and the desperado. It might be days, a week, before ice would again form; yet, connecting the island with the western bank, it was even now in place. Blair had but to wait until cover of night, and depart in peace — on foot, to be sure, but in the course of days a man could travel far afoot. Doubtless he realized all this. Doubtless he was laughing at them now. The curses redoubled.

Stetson had been taking off his coat. He now draped it about his rifle-stock, and placed his sombrero on top. "All ready, boys," he cautioned, and raised it slowly into view.

Instantly from the centre of the driftwood heap there arose a tracing of blue smoke. Simultaneously, irregular in outline as though punched by a dull instrument, a jagged hole appeared in the felt of the hat.

As instantly, eight rifles on the bank began to play. The crackling of their reports was like infantry, the sliding click of the ejecting mechanism as continuous and regular as the stamp-stamp of many presses. The smoke rose over their heads in a blue cloud. Far out on the river, under impact of the bullets, splinters of the rotted driftwood leaped high into the air. Now and then the open water in front splashed into spray as a ball went amiss. Not until the rifle magazines were empty did they cease, and then only to reload. Again and once again they repeated the onslaught, until it would seem no object the size of a human being upon the place where they aimed could by any possibility remain alive. Then, and not until then, did silence return, did the dummy upon Stetson's rifle again raise its head.

But this time there was no response. They waited a minute, two minutes — tried the ruse again, and it was as before. Had they really hit the man out there, as they hoped, or was he, conscious of a trick, merely lying low? Who could tell? The uncertainty, the inaction, goaded all that was reckless in cowboy Buck's nature, and he sprang to his feet.

"I'm going out there if I have to walk on the bottom of the river!" he blazed.

Instantly Stetson's hands were on his legs, pulling him prostrate.

"Down, you fool!" he growled. "At the bottom of the river is where you'd be quick enough." The speaker turned to the others. "One of us is done for already. There's no use for the rest to risk our lives without a show. We've either potted Blair or we have n't. There's nothing more to be done now, anyway. We may as well go back."

For a moment there was a murmur of dissent, but it was short-lived. One and all realized that what the rancher said was true. For the present at least, nature was against them, on the side of the outlaw; and to combat nature was useless. Another time — yes, there would surely be another time; and grim faces grew grimmer at the thought. Another time it would be different.

"Yes, we may as well go." It was Mick Kennedy who spoke. "We can't stay here long, that's sure." He tossed his rifle over to Stetson. "Carry that, will you?" and rising, regardless of danger, he walked over to cowboy Pete, took the dead body in his arms, without a glance behind him, stalked back to where the horses were waiting, laid his burden almost tenderly across the shoulder of his own mustang, and mounted behind. Coming up, the others, likewise in silence, got into their saddles, not as at starting, with one bound, but heavily, by aid of stirrups. Still in silence, Mick leading, the legs of dead Pete dangling at the pony's shoulder, they faced east, and started moving slowly along the backward trail.

CHAPTER XIII

A SHOT IN THE DARK

WINTER, long delayed, came at last in earnest. On the morning of the seventeenth of January — the ranchers did not soon forget the date — a warm snow, soft with moisture, drove tumbling in from the east. All the morning it came, thicker and thicker, until on the level, several inches had fallen; then, so rapidly that one could almost discern the change, the temperature began lowering, the wind shifting from the east to the north, from north to west, and steadily rising. The surface of the snow froze to ice, the snowflakes turned to sleet, and went bounding and grinding, forming drifts but to disperse again, journeying aimlessly on, cutting viciously at the chance animal who came in their path like a myriad of tiny knives.

All that day the force of the LR ranch labored in the increasing storm to get the home herds safely behind the shelter of the corral. It was impossible for cattle long to face such a storm; but with this very emergency in mind, Rankin had always in Winter kept the scattered bunches to the north and west, and under these conditions the feat was accomplished by dusk, and the half-frozen cowboys tumbled into their bunks, to fall asleep almost before

they assumed the horizontal. The other ranchers wondered why it was that Rankin was so prosperous and why his herd seldom diminished in Winter. Had they been observant, they could have learned one reason that day.

All the following night the storm moaned and raged, and the cold became more and more intense. It came in through the walls of houses and through bunk coverings, and bit at one like a living thing. Nothing could stop it, nothing unprotected could withstand it. In the great corral behind the windbreak, the cattle, all headed east, were jammed together for warmth, a conglomerate mass of brown heads and bodies from which projected a wilderness of horns.

The next morning broke with a clear sky but with the thermometer marking many degrees below zero. Out of doors, when the sun had arisen, the light was dazzling. As far as eye could reach not a spot of brown relieved the white. The layer of frozen snow lay like a vast carpet stretched tight from horizon to horizon. Although it was only snow, yet so far as the herds of the ranchers were concerned it might have been a protecting armor of steel. Well did the tired cowboys, stiff from the previous day's struggle, know what was before them, when at daylight Graham routed them out. Food the helpless multitude must have. If they could not find it for themselves it must be found for them; and in stolid disapproval the men ate a hasty breakfast by the light of a kerosene lamp and went forth to the inevitable.

Rankin and Ben and Graham were already astir, and under their supervision the campaign was rapidly begun.

For a few days the stock must be fed on hay, and seven of the available fifteen men of the ranch force were detailed to keep full the great racks in the cattle stockade — a task in itself, with the myriad hungry mouths swarming on every hand, all but Herculean. The others, Rankin himself among the number, undertook the greater feat of in a measure opening the range for the future.

The device which the big man had evolved for this purpose, and had used on previous similar occasions, was a simple triangular snow-plough several feet in width, with guiding handles behind. Comparatively narrow as was the ribbon path cleared by this appliance, its length was only limited by the endurance of the horses and the driver, and in the course of the day many an acre could be uncovered. Half an hour after sunrise, the eight outfits thus equipped were lined up side by side and headed due northwest to a range which had been but little pastured.

For five miles straight as a taut line they went, leaving behind them eight brown stripes alternating with bands of white between. Then back and forth, back and forth, for the distance of another mile they vibrated until it was noon, when eight more connecting brown ribbons were stretched beside their predecessors back to the ranch-house. In the afternoon the labor was repeated, until by night the clearing, a gigantic mottled fan with an abnormally long handle, lay in vivid contrast against the surrounding white.

The second day was the same, except that but seven bands stretched out behind the moving squad. Rankin, game as he was, could scarcely put one foot ahead of the

other, and in consequence, changing his tactics, he mounted the old buckboard and departed on a tour of inspection toward the north range. He was late in returning, and, as usual, very taciturn; but after supper, as he and Ben were smoking in friendly silence by the kitchen fire, he turned to the younger man.

"Someone stayed at the north range last night," he announced abruptly. "He slept there and had a fire."

Ben showed no surprise. "I thought so, probably," he replied. "Late this afternoon I ran across a trail leading in from the west along our clearing, and headed that way. It was one lone chain of footprints."

Rankin shivered, and replenished the fire. His long drive had chilled him through and through.

"I suppose you have an idea who made that trail?" he said.

Though each knew that the other had heard the details of Pete's death, neither had mentioned the incident. To do so had seemed superfluous. Now, however, each realized the thought in the other's mind, and chose not to avoid it.

"Yes," answered Ben, simply. "I suppose it was made by Tom Blair."

Never before had Rankin heard Benjamin Blair speak that name. He stretched back heavily in his chair and lit his pipe afresh.

"Ben," he said, "I 'm getting old. I never began to realize the fact until this Winter; but I sha'n't last many more years." Puff, puff went two twin clouds of smoke toward the ceiling. "Civilization has some advantages

over the frontier, and this is one of them: it 's kinder to the old."

Never before had Rankin spoken in this way, and the other understood the strength of his conviction.

"You work too hard," he said soberly, though he felt the inadequacy of the trite remark. "It 's unnecessary. I wish you would n't do it."

Rankin threw an outward motion with his powerful hand. "Yes, I know; but when I quit moving I want to die. I know I could get a steam-heated back room in a quiet street of a sleepy town somewhere and coddle myself into a good many years yet; but it is n't worth the price. I love this big free life too well ever to leave it. Most of the people one meets here are rough, but in time that will all change. It 's changing now; and meantime nature compensates for everything."

There was a moment's silence, and then, as though there had been no digression, Rankin went back to the former subject. "Yes," he said slowly, "I think you 're right about those being Tom Blair's tracks." He turned and faced the younger man squarely. "If it is, Ben, it means he 's been frozen out from his hiding-place, wherever that is, and he 's crazy desperate. He 'd do anything now. He would n't ever come back here otherwise."

Ben Blair's blue eyes tightened until the lashes were all but parallel.

"Yes," Rankin repeated, "he 's crazy desperate to come here at all — especially so now." A pause, but the eyes did not shift. "God knows I 'm sorry he ever came back. I was glad we found that trail too late to follow it to-day;

but it 's only postponing the end. I believe he 'll be here at the ranch to-night. He 's got to get a horse — he 's got to do something right away; and I 'm going to watch. If he don't come I 'll take up the old trail in the morning."

Once more the pause, more intense than words. "He can't escape again, unless — unless he gets me first — He must be desperate crazy."

Rankin arose heavily and knocked the ashes out of his pipe preparatory to bed.

"There are a lot of things I might say now, Ben, but I won't say them. We 're not living in a land of law. We have n't someone always at hand to shift our responsibility onto. In self-protection, we 've got to take justice more or less into our own hands. One thing I will say, though, and I hope you 'll never forget it. Think twice before you ever take the life of another human being, Ben; think twice. Be sure your reasons are mighty good — and then think again. Don't ever act in hot blood, or as long as you live you 'll know remorse." The speaker paused and his breath came fast. Something more — who knew how much? — trembled on the end of his tongue. He roused himself with an effort and turned toward his bunk. "Good-night, Ben. I trust you as I 'd trust my own son."

The younger man watched the departing figure and felt the irony of the separation that keeps us silent even when we wish to be nearest and most helpful to our friends and makes our words a mockery.

"Thank you, sir, I shall not forget. Good-night," he said.

When a few minutes later the young man sauntered out to the barns, everything was peaceful as usual. From the horse-stalls came the steady monotonous grind of the animals at feed. In the cattle-yards was heard the sleepy breathing of the multitude of cattle. Perfect contentment and oblivion was the keynote of the place, and the watcher looked at the lethargic mass thoughtfully. He had always responded instinctively to the moods of dumb animals. He did so now. The passive trustfulness of the great herd affected him deeply. Twice he made the circuit of the buildings, but finding nothing amiss returned to his place. The sound of the horses feeding had long since ceased. The sleepy murmur of the cattle was lower and more regular. In the increasing coldness the vapor of their breath, even though the night was dark and moonless, arose in an indistinct cloud, like the smoke of smouldering camp-fires over the tents of a sleeping army. For two days the man had been doing the heaviest kind of work. Gradually, amid much opening and closing of eyelids, consciousness lapsed into semi-consciousness, and he dozed.

Suddenly — whether it was an hour or a minute afterwards, he did not know — he awoke and sat up listening. Some sound had caught and held his sub-conscious attention. He waited a moment, intent, scarcely breathing, and then sprang swiftly to his feet. The sound now came definitely from the sheds at the left. It was the deep chesty groan of a horse in pain.

Once upon his feet, Ben Blair ran toward the barn, not cautiously but precipitately. He had not grown to

maturity amid animals without learning something of their language; but even if such had been the case, he could scarcely have mistaken that sound. Mortal pain and mortal terror vibrated in those tones. No human being could have cried for help more distinctly. The frozen snow squeaked under the rancher's feet as he ran. "Stop there!" he shouted. "Stop there!" and throwing open the nearest door, unmindful of danger, he dashed into the interior darkness.

The barn was eighty odd feet in length, and as Ben swung open the door at the east corner there was a flash of fire from the extreme west end, and a bullet splintered the wood just back of his head. His precipitate entry had been his salvation. He groped his way ahead, the groans of the horses in his ears — for now he detected more than one voice. A growing realization of what he would find was in his mind, and then a dark form shot through the west door, and he was alone. Impulse told him to follow, but the sound of pain and struggle kept him back. He struck a match, held it like a torch above him, moved ahead, stopped. The flame burned down the dry pine until it reached his fingers, blackened them, went out; but he did not stir. He had expected the thing he saw, expected it at the first cry he heard; yet infinitely more horrible than a picture of imagination was the reality. He did not light another match, he did not wish to see. To hear was bad enough — to hear and to know. He started for the door; and behind him three great horses, hopelessly maimed and crippled, struggled to rise, and failing, groaned anew.

It seemed Ben's fate this night to be just too late for service. Before he reached the exit there sounded, spattering and intermittent, like the first popping kernels of corn in a pan, a succession of pistol-shots from the ranch-house. There was no answer, and as he stepped out into the air the sound ceased. As he did so, the kitchen of the house sprang alight from a lamp within. There was a moment of apparent inactivity, and then, the door swinging open, fair against the lighted background, shading his eyes to look into the outer darkness, stood Rankin. Instantly a wave of premonition flooded the watching Benjamin.

"Go back!" he shouted. "Go back! Back, quick!" and careless of personal danger, he started running for the ranch-house as before he had raced for the barn.

The warning might as well have been ungiven. Almost before the last words were spoken there came from the darkness at Ben's right the sound he had been expecting — a single vicious rifle report; and as though a mighty invisible weight were crushing him down, Rankin sank to the floor.

Then for the first time in his history Ben Blair lost self-control. Quick as thought he changed his course from the house to the direction from which the shot had come. The great veins of his throat swelled until it seemed he could scarcely breathe. Curses, horrible, blighting curses, combinations of malediction which had never even in thought entered his mind before, rolled from his lips. His brain seemed afire. But one idea possessed him — to lay hands upon this intruding being who had in cold blood done that fiendish deed in the barn, and now had

shot his best friend on earth. The rage of primitive man who knew not steel or gunpowder was his; the ferocity of the great monkey, the aborigine's predecessor, whose means of offence were teeth and nails. Straight ahead the man rushed, seeming not to run, but fairly to bound, turned suddenly the angle at the corner of the machinery shed, stumbled over a snow-plough drawn up carelessly by one of the men, fell, regained his feet, and heard in his ears the thundering hoof-beats of a horse urged away at full speed.

For a moment Ben Blair stood as he had risen, gazing westward where the other had departed, but seeing nothing, not even a shadow. Clouds had formed over the sky, and the night was of intense darkness. To attempt to follow a trail now was waste of time; and gradually, as he stood there, the unevolved fury of the man transformed. His tongue became silent; not a human being had heard the outburst. The physical paroxysm relaxed. As he returned to the ranch-house no observer would have detected in him other than the usual matter-of-fact rancher; yet beneath that calm was a purpose infinitely more terrible than the animal blaze of a few minutes before, a tenacity more relentless than a tiger on the trail of its quarry, than an Indian stalking his enemy; a formulated purpose which could patiently wait, but eventually and inevitably would grind its object to powder.

Meanwhile, back at the scene of the tragedy, there had been feverish action. Many of the cowboys were already about the barns, and lanterns gleamed in the horse corral. Within the house, in the nearest bunk where they had laid

him, stretched the proprietor of the ranch. About him were grouped Grannis, Graham, and Ma Graham. The latter was weeping hysterically — her head buried in her big checked apron, the great mass of her body vibrating with the effort. As Ben approached, her husband glanced up. Upon his face was the dull unreasoning indecision of a steer which had lost its leader; an animal passivity which awaited command.

"Rankin 's dead," he announced dully. "He 's hit here." A withered hand indicated a spot on the left breast. "He went quick."

Grannis said nothing, and walking up Ben Blair stopped beside the bunk. He took a long look at the kindly heavy face of the only man he had ever called friend; but not a feature of his own face relaxed, not a muscle quivered. Grannis watched him fixedly, almost with fascination. Gray-haired gambler and man of fortune that he was, he realized as Graham could never do the emotions which so often lie just back of the locked countenance of a human being; realized it, and with the grim carelessness of a frontiersman admired it.

Of a sudden there was a grinding of frosty snow in the outer yard, a confused medley of human voices, a snorting of horses; and, turning, Ben went to the door. One glance told him the meaning of the cluster of cowboys. He walked out toward them deliberately.

"Boys," he said steadily, "put up your horses. You could n't find a mountain in the darkness to-night." A pause. "Besides," slowly, "this is my affair. Put them up and go to bed."

For a moment there was silence. The hearers could scarcely believe their ears.

"You mean we 're to let him go?" queried a hesitating voice at last.

Blair folded up the broad brim of his hat and looked from face to face as it was revealed by the uncertain light from the window.

"I mean what I said," he repeated evenly. "I 'll attend to this matter myself."

For a moment again there was silence, but only for a moment.

"No you won't!" blazed a voice suddenly. "Rankin was the whitest man that ever owned a brand. Just because the kyote that shot him lived with your mother won't save him. I 'm going — and now."

Quicker than a cat, so swiftly that the other cowboys scarcely realized what was happening, the long gaunt Benjamin was at the speaker's side. With a leap he had him by the throat, had dragged him from the back of the horse, and held him at arm's length.

"Freeman," — the voice was neither raised nor lowered, but steady as the drip of falling water, — "Freeman, you know better than that, and you know you know better." The grip of the long left hand on the throat tightened. The fingers of the right locked. "Say so — quick!"

Face to face, looking fair into each other's eyes, stood the two men, while the spectators watched breathlessly as they would have done at a climax in a play. It was a case of will against will, elemental man against his brother.

"I 'm waiting," suggested Blair, and even in the dim

light Freeman saw the blue eyes beneath the long lashes darken. Instinctively the victim's hand went to his hip and lingered there; but he could no more have withdrawn the weapon which he felt there than he could have struck his own mother. He started to speak; but his lips were dry, and he moistened them with his tongue.

"Yes, I know better," he admitted low.

Ben Blair dropped his hand and turned to the spectators. "Men," he said slowly and distinctly, "for the present at least I 'm master of this ranch, and when I give an order I expect to be obeyed." Again his eye went from face to face fearlessly, dominantly. "Does any other man doubt me?"

Not a voice broke the stillness of the night. Only the restless movement of the impatient mustangs answered.

"Very well, then, you heard what I said. Go to bed, and to-morrow go on with your work as usual. Grannis will be in charge while I 'm gone," and without a backward glance the long figure returned to the ranch-house.

The weazened foreman and the tall adventurer had been watching him impassively from the doorway. In silence they made room for him to pass.

"Grannis," he asked directly, "have those horses been taken care of?"

"No, sir."

"See to it at once then."

"Yes, sir."

The blue eyes rested for a moment on the other's face.

"You heard who I said would be in charge while I 'm away?"

"Yes, sir," again.

Ben moved over to the bunk opposite to that in which lay the dead man and took off his hat and coat.

"Graham!"

The foreman came close, stood at attention.

"Keep awake and call me before daylight, will you?"

"I will."

"And, Graham!"

"Yes."

"I may be gone several days. You and Ma attend to the — burial. Dig the grave out under the big maple." A pause. "I think," steadily, "he would have liked it there."

The foreman nodded silently.

Benjamin Blair dropped into the bunk, drew the blankets over him and closed his eyes. As he did so, from the direction of the barn there came a succession of pistol shots — one, two, three. Then again silence fell.

CHAPTER XIV

THE INEXORABLE TRAIL

ONCE more, westward across the prairie country, there moved a tall and sinewy youth astride a vicious looking buckskin. This time, however, it was very early in the morning. The rider moved slowly, his eyes on the ground. His outfit was more elaborate than on the former journey. A heavy blanket and a light camp kit were strapped behind his saddle, and so attached that they could be quickly transferred to his back. A big rifle was stretched across his right knee and the saddle-horn. At either hip rode a great holster. The air, despite the cloudiness, was bitter cold; and he wore a heavy sheepskin coat with the wool turned in, and long gauntlets reaching half-way to his elbows. A broad leather belt held the heavy coat in place, and attached to it was a thin sheath from which protruded the stout handle of a hunting-knife. He also wore another belt, fitted with many loops, each holding a gleaming little brass cylinder. No one seeing the man this morning could have made the mistake of considering him, as before, on a journey to see a lady.

Slowly day advanced. The east resolved itself from flaming red into the neutral tint of the remainder of the sky. The sun shone through the clouds, dissipated them,

was obscured, and shone again. The something which the man had been watching so intently gradually grew clearer. It was the trail of another horse — a galloping horse. It was easy to follow, and the rider looked about him. After a few miles, when the mustang had warmed to his second wind, a gauntleted hand dropped to the yellow neck and stroked it gently.

"Let 'em out a bit, Buck," said a voice, "let 'em out!" and with a flick of the dainty ears, almost as if he understood, the little beast fell into the steady swinging lope which was his natural gait, and which he could follow if need be without a break from sun to sun.

On they went, the trail they were following unwinding like a great tape steadily before them, the crunch of the frozen snow in their ears, tiny particles of it flying to the side and behind like spray. But, bravely as they were going, the horse ahead which had unwound that band of tracks had moved more swiftly. Not within inches did the best efforts of the buckskin approach those giant strides. It had been a desperate rider who had urged such a pace; and the grim face of the tall youth grew grimmer at the thought.

Not another sound than of their own making did they hear. Not an object uncovered of white did they see, until, thirteen miles out, they passed near the deserted Baker ranch; but the trail did not stop, nor did they, and ere long it faded again from view. The course was dipping well to the north now, and Ben realized that not again on his journey would he pass in sight of a human habitation.

All that mortal day the buckskin pounded monotonously ahead. The sun rose to the meridian, gazed warmly down upon them, softened the surface of the frozen snow until the crunch sounded mellower, and slowly descended to their left. The dainty ears of the pony, as the day waned, flattened close to his head. Foam gathered beneath the saddle and between the animal's legs; but doggedly relentless as his rider, he forged ahead. Much in common had these two beings; more closely than ever was their comradery cemented that day. Many times, with the same motion as at first, the man had leaned over and patted that muscular neck, dark and soiled now with perspiration. "Good old Buck," he said as to a fellow, "good old Buck!" and each time the set ears had flicked intelligently in response.

It was nearing sunset when they came in sight of the hills bordering the river, and the last mile Ben drew the buckskin to a walk. The chain of hoof-tracks had changed much since the morning. The buckskin could equal the strides of the other now, and the follower was content. The evenings were very short at this season of the year, and they would not attempt to go farther to-night. At the margin of the stream Ben rode along until he found a spot where the full strength of the current ate into the bank. There on the thinner ice he hammered with the butt of his heavy rifle until he broke a hole; then, the dumb one first, the two friends drank their fill. After that, side by side, they walked back until in the shelter of a high knoll the man found a space of perhaps half an acre where the grass, thick and unpastured, was practically

bare of snow. Here he removed saddle and bridle, and without lariat or hobble — for they knew each other now, these two — he turned the pony loose to graze. He himself, with the kit and blanket and a handful of dead wood, went to the hill-top, where he could see for miles around, built a tiny fire, an Indian's fire, made a can of strong black coffee, and ate of the jerked beef he had brought. Later, he cleared a spot the size of a man's grave, and with grass and the blanket built a shallow nest, in which he stretched himself, his elbow on the earth, his face in his hand, thinking, thinking.

The night came on. As the eastern sky had done in the morning, so now the west crimsoned gloriously, became the color of blood, then gradually shaded back until it was neutral again, and the stars from a few scattering dots increased in numbers and filled the dome as scattered sand-grains cover a floor. Darkness came, and with it the slight wind of the day died down until the air was perfectly still. The cold, which had retreated for a time, returned, augmented. As though it were a live thing moving about, its coming could be heard in the almost indistinguishable crackling of the snow-crust. As beneath a crushing weight, the ice of the great river boomed and crackled from its touch.

Wide-eyed but impassive, the man watched and listened. Scarcely a muscle of his body moved. Not once, as the hours slipped by, did he drowse ; not for an instant was he off his guard. With the first trace of morning in the east, he was astir. As on the night before, he made his Indian's fire, ate his handful of beef, and drank of the

strong black coffee. The pony, sleepy as a child, was aroused and saddled. The ice which had frozen during the night over their drinking-hole was broken. Then, both man and horse stiff and sore from the exposure and the previous exertion, the trail was taken up anew.

For five miles, until both were warmed to their work, the man and beast trotted along side by side. "Now, Buck, old boy!" said Ben, and mounting, they were off in earnest. At first the trail they were following was that of a horse that walked; but later it stretched out into the old long-strided gallop, and the pursuer read the tale of quirt and spur which had forced the change.

Three hours out, thirty odd miles from the river as the rider calculated the distance, he came to the first break in the seemingly endless trail of hoofprints he was following. A heap of snow scraped aside and two brown spots on the earth told the story of where the pursued man and horse had paused to rest and sleep. No water was near. Neither the human nor the beast had strayed from the direct line; they had merely halted and dropped almost within their tracks. Just beyond was the spot where the man had remounted, where the flight began anew; and again a tale lay written on the surface of the snow. The prints of the horse's feet were now unsteady and irregular. Within a few rods there was on the right a red splash of blood; then others, a drop at a time. Very hard it had been to put life into the beast at starting; deep the rowels of the great spur had been dug. Ben Blair lightly touched the neck of his buckskin and gave the word to go.

"They were only thirty miles ahead last night, Buck, old chap," he said, "and very tired. We 'll gain on them fast to-day."

But though they gained — the record of the tracks told that — they did not gain fast. Notwithstanding he still galloped doggedly ahead, the gallant little buckskin was plainly weakening. The eternal pounding through the snow was eating up his strength, and though his spirit was indomitable the end of his endurance was in sight. No longer would the dainty ears respond to a touch on the neck. With head lowered he moved forward like a machine. While the sun was yet above the horizon, the lope diminished to a trot, the trot to a walk — a game walk, but only a walk.

Then, for the second time that day, Ben dismounted. Silently he removed saddle and bridle, transferred the blanket and kit to his own back, and then, the rifle under his arm, stopped a moment by the pony's side and laid the dainty muzzle against his face.

"Buck, old boy," he said, "you 've done mighty well — but I can beat you now. Maybe some day we 'll meet again. I hope we shall. Anyway, we 're better for having known each other. Good-bye."

A moment longer his face lay so, as his hand would have lain in a friend's hand at parting; then, with a last pat to the silken nose, he started on ahead.

At first the man walked steadily; then, warming to the work, he broke into the swinging jog-trot of the frontiersman, the hunter who travels afoot. Many Indians the youth had known in his day, and from them he had learned

much; one thing was that in walking or running to step straight-footed instead of partially sideways, as the white man plants his sole, was to gain inches at every motion, besides making it easier to retrace his steps should he wish to do so. This habit had become a part of him, and now the marks of his own trail were like the alternately broken line which represents a railroad on a map.

As long as he could see to read from the white page of the snow-blanket, Ben Blair jogged ahead. Hot anger, that he could not repress, was with him constantly now, for the trail before him was very fresh, and, distinct beside it, more and more frequent were the red marks of an animal's suffering. He knew what horse it was the other had stolen. It was "Lady," one of Scotty's prize thoroughbred mares, the one Florence had ridden so many times. Often during those last hours the man wondered at the endurance of the mare. None but a thoroughbred would have stood up this long; and even she, if she ever stopped, — but the man ahead doubtless knew this also, for he would not let her stop, not so long as life remained and spur and quirt had power to torture.

Thus night came on, folding within its concealing arms alike the hunter and the pursued. Ben did not build a fire this night. First of all, though during the day at different times he had been able to see the bordering trees of the White River at his left and the Bad River at his right, the trail hung to the comparatively level land of the great divide between, and not a scrap of wood was within miles. Again, although he did not actually know, he could not believe he was far behind, and he would run no

risk of giving a warning sign to eyes which must be watching the backward trail. The fierce hunger of a healthy animal was his; but his supply of beef was limited, and he ate a meagre allowance, washing it down with a draught of river water from his canteen. Rolled up in the blanket, through which the stinging cold pierced as though it were gossamer, shivering, beating his hands and feet to prevent their stiffening, longing for protecting fur like a wolf or a buffalo, keeping constant watch about him as does a great prairie owl, the interminably long hours of his second night dragged by.

"The beginning of the end," he soliloquized, when once more it was light enough so that standing he could see the earth at his feet. Well he knew that ere this the other horse was eliminated from the chase — that it was now man against man. God! how his joints ached when he stretched them! — how his muscles pained at the slightest motion! He ground his teeth when he first began to walk, and hobbled like a rheumatic cripple; but within a half-hour tenacity had won, and the relentless jog-trot of the interrupted line was measuring off the miles anew.

The chase was nearing an end. Long ere noon, in the distance toward which he was heading, Blair detected a brown dot against the white. Steadily, as he advanced, it resolved itself into the thing he had expected, and stood revealed before him, the centre of a horribly legible page, the last page in the biography of a noble horse. Let us pass it by: Ben did, looking the other way. But a new and terrible vitality possessed him. His weariness left him, as pain passes under an opiate. He did not pause to

eat, to drink. Tireless as a waterfall, watchful as a hawk, he jogged on, on, a mile — two miles — five — came to a rise in the great roll of the lands — stopped, his heart suddenly pounding the walls of his chest. Before him, not half a mile away, moving slowly westward, was the diminutive black shape of a man travelling afoot!

Instantly the primal hunting instinct of the Anglo-Saxon awoke in the lank Benjamin. The incomparable fascination which makes man-hunting the sport supreme of all ages gripped him tight. The stealthy cunning of a savage became on the moment his. A plan of ambush, one which could scarcely fail, flashed into his mind. The trail of the divide narrowing now, stretched for miles and miles straight before them. That black figure would scarcely leave it. The pursuer had but to make a great detour, get far in advance, find a point of concealment, and wait.

Swift as thought was action. Back on his trail until he was out of sight went Ben Blair; then, turning to his right, he made straight for the concealing bed of Bad River. Once there, he turned west again, following the winding course of the stream toward its source. Faster than ever he moved, the pat-pat of his feet on the deadening snow drowning the sound of the great breaths he drew into his lungs and sent whistling out again through his nostrils. As with the horse, the sweat oozed at every pore. Collecting on his brow and face, it dripped slowly from his great chin. Dampening, his clothes clung binding-tight to his body; but he never noticed. He looked neither to the right nor to the left, nor behind him;

but, like a sprinter approaching the wire, only straight ahead.

Under him the miles flowed past like water. Five, ten, a dozen he covered; then of a sudden he turned again to the south, quitting his shelter of the river-bed. For a time the country was very rough, but he scarcely slackened his pace. Once he fell through the crust of a drift, and went down nearly to his neck; but he crowded his way through by sheer strength, emerging a powdered figure from the snow which clung to his damp clothes. The sun was down now, and he knew darkness would come very quickly and he must reach the divide, the probable trail, before it fell, and there select his point of waiting.

As he moved on, he saw some miles ahead that which decided him. A low chain of hills, stretching to the north and south, crossed the great divide as a fallen log spans a path. In these hills, appreciable even at this distance, there was a dip, an almost level pass. A small diversity it was on the face of nature, but to a weary man, fleeing afoot, seen in the distance it would irresistibly appeal. Almost as certain as though he saw the black figure already heading for it, the hunter felt it would be utilized. Anyway, he would take the chance; and with a last spurt of speed he put himself fairly in its way. To clear a narrow strip of ground the length of his body, and build around it like a breastwork a border of snow, was the work of but a few minutes; then, wrapped in his blanket, too deadly tired to even attempt to eat, he dropped behind the cover like a log. At first the rest was that of Paradise; but swiftly came the reaction, the chill. To

lie there in his present condition meant but one thing, that never would he arise again; and with an effort the man got to his feet and started walking. It was dark again now, and the sky was becoming rapidly overcast. Within an hour it began to snow, a steady big-flaked snow that fairly filled the air and lay where it fell. The night grew slightly warmer, and, rolling in the blanket once more, Ben lay down; but the warning chill soon had him again upon his feet, walking back and forth in the one beaten path.

Very long the two previous nights had been. Interminable seemed this third. As long as the sun or moon or stars were shining, the man never felt completely alone; but in this utter darkness the hours seemed like days. The steadily falling snowflakes added to the impression of loneliness and isolation. They were like the falling clods of earth in a grave: something crowding between him and life, burying and suffocating him where he stood. Try as he might, the man could not shake off the weird impression, and at last he ceased the effort. Grimly stolid, he lit his pipe, and, his damp clothing having dried at last, cleared a fresh spot and lay down, the horrible loneliness still tugging at his heart.

Finally, after an eternity of waiting, the morning came. With it the storm ceased and the sun shone brightly. Behind the barricade, Ben Blair ate the last of his beef and drank the few remaining swallows of water from his canteen. His muscles were stiff from the inaction, and, not wishing to show himself, he kicked vigorously into space as he lay. At intervals he made inspection of the

east, looking out over the glitter of white; but not a living thing was in sight. An hour he watched, two hours, while the sun, beating down obliquely, warmed him back into activity; then of a sudden his eyes became fixed, the grip upon his rifle tightened. Far to the southeast, something dark against the snow was moving, — was coming toward him.

Rapidly the figure approached, while lower behind the barricade dropped the body of Benjamin Blair. The sun was in his eyes, so that as yet he could not make out whether it was man or beast. Not until the object was within three hundred yards, until it passed by to the north, did Ben make out that it was a great gray wolf headed straight for the bed of Bad River.

Again two hours of unbroken monotony passed. The sun had almost reached the meridian, and the man behind the barricade had all but decided he must have miscalculated somehow, when in the dim distance as before there appeared a tiny dark object, but this time directly from the east. For five minutes Ben watched it fixedly, his hand shading his eyes; then, slowly as moves the second-hand of a great clock, a change indescribable came over his face. No need was there now to ask whether it was a human being that was approaching. There was no mistaking that slow, swinging man-motion. At last the moment was approaching for which the youth had been striving so madly for the last few days, the moment he had for years been conscious would some day come. It would soon be his; and with the thought his teeth set firmer, and a fierce joy tugged at his heart.

Five minutes, ten minutes dragged by; yet no observer, however close, could have seen a muscle stir in the long body of the waiting man. Like a great panther cat he lay there, the blue eyes peering just over the surface of the ambush. Not ten paces away could an observer have told the tip of that motionless sombrero from the protruding top of a boulder. Gradually the approaching figure grew more distinct. A red handkerchief showed clearly about the man's neck. Then a slight limp in the left leg intruded itself, and a droop of the shoulders that spoke weariness. He was very near by this time, so near that the black beard which covered his face became discernible, likewise the bizarre breadth of the Mexican belt above the baggy chaperejos. The crunch of the snow-crust marked his every footfall.

And still Ben Blair had not stirred. Slowly, as the other had approached, the big blue eyes had darkened until they seemed almost brown. Involuntarily the massive chin had moved forward; but that was all. On the surface he was as calm as a lake on a windless night; but beneath, — God! what a tempest was raging! Each one of those minutes he waited so impassively marked the rush of a year's memories. Human hate, primal instinct all but uncontrollable, throbbed in his accelerated pulse-beats. Like the continuous shifting scenes in a panorama, the incidents of his life in which this man had played a part appeared mockingly before his mind's eye. Plainly, as though in his physical ear, he heard the shuffle of an uncertain hand upon a latch; he saw a figure with bloodshot eyes lurch into a rude floorless room, saw it approach

a bunk whereon lay a sick woman, his mother; heard the swift passage of angry words, words which had branded themselves into his memory forever. Once more he was on all fours, scurrying for his life toward the dark opening of a protecting kennel. As plainly as though the memory were of yesterday, he gazed into the blazing mouth of a furnace, felt its scorching breath on his cheek. Swiftly the changing scenes danced before his eyes. A rifle-shot, real almost as though he could smell the burning powder, sounded in his brain. Within the circle of light from a kerosene lamp a great figure sank in a heap to a ranch-house floor. Against a background of unbroken white a trail of red blotches ended in the mutely pathetic figure of a prostrate dying horse — a noble thoroughbred. What varied horrors seethed in the watcher's brain, crowded each other, recurred and again recurred! How the long sinewy fingers itched to clutch that throat above the red neckerchief! He could see the man's face now, as, ignorant of danger so close, he was passing by fifty feet to the left, looking to neither side, doggedly heading toward the pass. With the first motion since the figure had appeared, the hand of the watcher tightened on the rifle, raised it until its black muzzle peeped over the elevation of snow. A pair of steady blue eyes gazed down the long barrel, brought the sights in line with a spot between the shoulders and the waist of the unsuspecting man, the trigger-finger tightened, almost —

A preventing something, something not primal in the youth, gripped him, held him for a second motionless. To kill a man from an ambush, even such an one as this,

without giving him a chance — no, he could not quite do that. But to take him by the throat with his bare hands, and then slowly, slowly —

As noiselessly as the rifle had raised, it dropped again. The muscles of the long legs tightened as do those of a sprinter awaiting the starting pistol. Then over the barricade, straight as a tiger leaps, shot a tall youth with steel-blue eyes, hatless, free of hand, straight for that listless, moving figure; the scattered snow flying to either side, the impact of the bounding feet breaking the previous stillness. Tom Blair, the outlaw, could not but hear the rush. Instinctively he turned, and in the fleeting second of that first glance Ben could see the face above the beard-line blanch. As one might feel should the Angel of Death appear suddenly before him, Tom Blair must have felt then. As though fallen from the sky, this avenging demon was upon him. He had not time to draw a revolver, a knife; barely to swing the rifle in his hand upward to strike, to brace himself a little for the oncoming rush.

With a crash the two bodies came together. Simultaneously the rifle descended, but for all its effectiveness it might have been a dead weed-stalk in the hands of a child. It was not a time for artificial weapons, but only for nature's own; a war of gripping, strangling hands, of tooth and nail. Nearly of a size were the two men. Both alike were hardened of muscle; both realized the battle was for life or death. For a moment they remained upright, clutching, parrying for an advantage; then, locked each with each, they went to the ground. Beneath and about them the fresh snow flew, filling their eyes, their mouths.

Squirming, straining, over and over they rolled; first the beardless man on top, then the bearded. The sound of their straining breath was continuous, the ripping of coarse cloth an occasional interruption; but from the first, a spectator could not but have foreseen the end. The elder man was fighting in self-defence: the younger, he of the massive protruding jaw — a jaw now so prominent as to be a positive disfigurement — in unappeasable ferocity. Against him in that hour a very giant could not have held his own. Merely a glimpse of his face inspired terror. Again and again as they struggled his hand had clutched at the other's throat, but only to have his hold broken. At last, however, his adversary was weakening under the strain. Blind terror began to grip Tom Blair. At first a mere suggestion, then a horrible certainty, possessed him as to the identity of the relentless being who opposed him. Again the other's hand, like the creeping tentacle of an octopus, sought his throat, would not be stayed. He struggled with all his might against it, until it seemed the blood-vessels of his neck would burst, but still the hold tightened. He clutched at the long fingers desperately, bit at them, felt his breath coming hard. Freeing his own hand, he smashed with his fist again and again into that long thin face so near his own, knew that another tentacle had joined with the first, felt the impossibility of drawing air into his lungs, realized that consciousness was deserting him, saw the sun over him like a mocking face — then knew no more.

CHAPTER XV

IN THE GRIP OF THE LAW

HOW long Tom Blair was unconscious he did not know. When he awoke he could scarcely believe his own senses; and he looked about him dazedly. The sun was shining down as brightly as before. The snow was as white. He had for some reason been spared, after all, and hope arose in his breast. He began to look around him. Not two rods away, his face clearly in sight, his eyes closed, dead asleep, lay the figure of the man who had waylaid him. For a moment he looked at the figure steadily; then, in distinct animal cunning, the lids of the close-set eyes tightened. Stealthily, almost holding his breath, he started to rise, then fell back with a jerk. For the first time he realized that he was bound hand and foot, so he could scarcely stir. He struggled, at first cautiously, then desperately, to be free; but the straps which bound him, those which had held his own blanket, only cut the deeper; and he gave it up. Flat on his back he lay watching the sleeper, his anger increasing. Again his eyes tightened.

"Wake up, curse you!" he yelled suddenly.

No answer, only the steady rise and fall of the sleeper's chest.

"Wake up, I say!" repeated the voice, in a tone to raise the dead.

This time there was response — of action. Slowly Ben Blair roused, and got up. A moment he looked about him; then, tearing a strip off his blanket, he walked over, and, against the other's protests and promises of silence, forced open the bearded lips, as though giving a horse the bit, and tied a gag full in the cursing mouth. Without a word or a superfluous look he returned and lay down. Another minute, and the regular breathing showed he was again asleep.

During all the warmth of that day Ben Blair slept on, as a child sleeps, as sleep the very aged; and although the bearded man had freed himself from the gag at last, he did not again make a sound. Too miserable himself to sleep, he lay staring at the other. Gradually through the haze of impotent anger a realization of his position came to him. He could not avoid the issue. To be sure, he was still alive; but what of the future? A host of possibilities flashed into his mind, but in every one there faced him a single termination. By no process of reasoning could he escape the inevitable end; and despite the chilliness of the air a sweat broke out over him. Contrition for what he had done he could not feel — long ago he had passed even the possibility of that; but fear, deadly and absorbing fear, had him in its clutch. The passing of the years, years full of lawlessness and violence, had left him the same man whom bartender "Mick" had terrorized in the long ago; and for the first time in his wretched life, personal death — not of another but of himself — looked at him with

steady eyes, and he could not return the gaze. All he could do was to wait, and think — and thoughts were madness. Again and again, knowing what the result would be, but seeking merely a diversion, he struggled at the straps until he was breathless; but relentless as time one picture kept recurring to his brain. In it was a rope, a stout rope, dangling from something he could not distinctly recognize; but what he could see, and see plainly, was a figure of a man, a bearded man — *himself* — at its end. The body swayed back and forth as he had once seen that of a "rustler" whom a group of cowboys had left hanging to the scraggly branch of a scrub-oak; as a pendulum marks time, measuring the velocity of the prairie wind.

With each recurrence of the vision the perspiration broke out over the man anew, the sunburned forehead paled. This was what it was coming to; he could not escape it. If ever purpose was unmistakably written on a human face, it had been on the face of the man who lay sleeping so near, the man who had trailed him like a tiger and caught him when he thought he was safe. From another, there might still be hope; but from this one, Jennie Blair's son — The vision of a woman lying white and motionless on the coarse blankets of a bunk, of a small boy with wonderfully clear blue eyes pounding harmlessly at the legs of the man looking down; the sound of a childish voice, accusing, menacing, ringing out over all, "You 've killed her! You 've killed her!" — this like a chasm stood between them, and could never be crossed. Clasped together, the long nervous fingers, a gentleman's

fingers still, twined and gripped each other. No, there was no hope. Better that the hands he had felt about his throat in the morning had done their work. He shut his eyes. A hot wave of anger, anger against himself, swept all other thoughts before it. Why, having gotten safely away, having successfully hidden himself, had he ever returned? Why, having in the depths of his nest in the middle of the island escaped once, had a paltry desire for revenge against the man he fancied had led the attack sent him back? What satisfaction was it, if in taking the life of the other man it cost him his own? Fool that he had been to imagine he could escape where no one had ever escaped before! Fool! Fool! Thus dragged by the long hours of the afternoon.

With the coming of the chill of evening, Ben Blair awoke and rubbed his eyes. A moment later he arose, and, walking over to his captive, looked down at him, steadily, peculiarly. So long as he could, Tom Blair returned the gaze; but at last his eyes fell. A voice sounded in his ears, a voice speaking low and clearly.

"You 're a human being," it said. "Physically, I 'm of your species, modelled from the same clay." A long pause. "I wonder if anywhere in my make-up there 's a streak of such as you!" Again a moment of silence, in which the elder man felt the blue eyes of the younger piercing him through and through. "If I thought there was a trace, or the suggestion of a trace, before God, I 'd kill you and myself, and I 'd do it now!" The speaker scanned the prostrate figure from head to foot, and back again. "And do it now," he repeated.

Silence fell; and in it, though he dared not look, coward Tom Blair fancied he heard a movement, imagined the other man about to put the threat into execution.

"No, no!" he pleaded. "People are different — different as day and night. You belong to your mother's kind, and she was good and pure." Every trace of the man's nerve was gone. But one instinct was active — to placate this relentless being, his captor. He fairly grovelled. "I swear she was pure. I swear it!"

Without speaking a word, Ben turned. Going back to his snow-blind, he packed his blanket and camp kit swiftly and strapped them to his shoulders. Returning, he gathered the things he had found upon the other's person — the rifle, the revolvers, the sheath-knife — into a pile; then deliberately, one against the other, he broke them until they were useless. Only the blanket he preserved, tossing it down by the side of the prostrate figure.

"Tom Blair," he said, no indication now that he had ever been nearer to the other than a stranger, "Tom Blair, I've got a few things to say to you, and if you're wise you'll listen carefully, for I sha'n't repeat them. You're going with me, and you're going free; but if you try to escape, or cause me trouble, as sure as I'm alive this minute I'll strip off every stitch of clothing you wear and leave you where I catch you though the snow be up to your waist."

Slowly he reached over and untied first the feet then the hands. "Get up," he ordered.

Tom Blair arose, stretched himself stiffly.

"Take that," Ben indicated the blanket, "and go ahead straight for the river."

The bearded man obeyed. To have secured his freedom he could not have done otherwise.

For ten minutes they moved ahead, only the crunching snow breaking the stillness.

"Trot!" said Ben.

"I can't."

"Trot!" There was no misunderstanding the tone.

In single file they jogged ahead, reached the river, and descended to the level surface of its bed.

"Keep to the middle, and go straight ahead."

On they went — jog, jog, jog.

Of a sudden from under cover of the bank a frightened cottontail sprang forth and started running. Instantly there was the report of a big revolver, and Tom jumped as though he felt the bullet in his back. Again the report sounded, and this time the rabbit rolled over and over in the snow.

Without stopping, Ben picked up the still struggling game and slipped a couple of fresh cartridges into the empty revolver chambers. The banks were lined with burrows and tracks, and within five minutes a second cottontail met the fate of the first.

"Come back!" called Ben to the man ahead.

Again Tom obeyed. He would have gone barefoot in the snow without a question now.

"Can you make a fire?"

"Yes."

"Do it, then. I left the matches in your pocket."

On opposite sides of the fire, from long forked sticks of green ash, they broiled strips of the meat which Ben dressed and cut. Likewise fronting each other, they ate in silence. Darkness was falling, and the glow from the embers lit their faces like those of two friends camping after a day's hunt. Had it not all been such deadly earnest, the scene would have been farce-comedy. Suddenly Tom Blair raised his eyes.

"What are you going to do with me?" he asked directly.

Ben said nothing.

The question was not repeated, but another trembled on the speaker's lips. At last it found words.

"When you had me down I — I thought you had done for me. Why did you — let me up?"

A pause followed. Then Ben's blue eyes raised and met the other's.

"You'd really like to know?"

"Yes."

Another moment of hesitation, but the youth's eyes did not move. "Very well, I'll tell you." More to himself than to the other he was speaking. His voice softened unconsciously. "A girl saved you that time, Tom Blair, a girl you never saw. You haven't any idea what it means, but I love that girl, and I could never look her in the face again with blood on my hands, even such blood as yours. That's the reason."

For a moment Tom Blair was silent; then into his brain there flashed a suggestion, and he grasped at it as a drowning man at a straw.

"Would n't it be blood on your hands just the same if you take me back where we 're headed, back to Mick Kennedy and —"

With a single motion, swift as though raised by a spring, Ben was upon his feet.

"Pick up your blanket!"

"But —"

"Silence!" The big square jaw shot forward like the piston of an engine. "Not another word of that, now or ever. Not another word!"

For a second the other paused doggedly, then taking up his load he moved ahead into the shadow.

Hour after hour they advanced, alternately walking and trotting, following the winding bed of the stream. Darkness fell, until they could not see each other's faces, until they were merely two black passing shadows; but the figure behind was relentless. Stimulating, compelling, he forced himself close. Ever and anon they could hear the frightened dash of a rabbit away from their path. More than once a snow-owl fluttered over their heads; but they took no notice. Twice the man in advance stumbled and fell; but though Ben paused he spoke no word. Like a soldier of the ranks on secret forced march, ignorant of his destination, given only conjecture as to what the morrow would bring forth, Tom Blair panted ahead.

With the coming of daylight Ben slowed to a walk, and looked about in quest of breakfast. Game was plentiful along the shelter of the stream, and before they had advanced a half-mile farther he saw ahead a flock of grouse roosting in the diverging branches of a cottonwood tree.

At two hundred yards, selecting those on the lowest branches, he dropped half a dozen, one after the other, with the rifle; and still the remainder of the flock did not fly. Very different were they from the open-land prairie chicken, whom a mere sound will send a-wing.

As on the night before, they broiled each what he wished, and, carefully cleaning the others, Ben packed them with his kit. Then, stolid as an Indian, he cleared a spot of earth, and wrapping himself in his blanket lay down full in the sunshine, smoking his pipe impassively. Taking the cue, Tom Blair likewise curled up like a dog near at hand.

Slowly and more slowly came the puffs of smoke from the captor's pipe; at last they ceased entirely. The lids of the youth's eyes closed, his breath came deep and regular. Beneath the blanket a muscle here and there twitched involuntarily, as in one who is very weary and asleep.

An hour passed, an hour without a sound; then, looking closely, a spectator could have seen one of Tom Blair's eyes open and close furtively. Again it opened, and its mate as well — to remain so. For a minute, two minutes, they studied the companion face uncertainly, suspiciously, then savagely. Another minute, and the body had risen to hands and knees. Still Ben did not stir, still the great expanse of his chest rose and fell. Tom Blair was satisfied. Hand over hand, feeling his way like a cat, he advanced toward the prostrate figure. Despite his caution, the crust of the snow crackled once beneath his touch, and he paused, a soundless curse forming upon his lips; but the

warning passed unheeded, and, bolder than before, he padded on.

Eight feet he gained, then ten. His color heightened, the repressed arteries throbbed above the gaudy neckerchief, the skulking animal intensified in the tightened muscles of the temples. As many feet again; but a few more minutes — then liberty and life. The better to guard his movements, his gaze fell. Out and down went his right hand, then his left, as his lithe body slid forward. Again he glanced up, paused — and on the instant every muscle of his tense body went suddenly lax. Instead of the closed eyes and sleeping face he had expected, two steady eyes were giving him back look for look. There had not been a motion; the face was yet that of a sleeper; the chest still rose and fell steadily; but the eyes!

Tom Blair's teeth ground each other like those of a dog with rabies. The suggestion of froth came to his lips.

"Curse you!" he cried. "Curse you forever!"

A moment they lay so, a moment wherein the last vestige of hope left the mind of the captive; but in it Ben Blair spoke no word. Maddening, immeasurably worse than denunciation, was that relentless silence. It was uncanny; and the bearded man felt the hairs of his head rising as the mane of a dog or a wolf lifts at a sound it does not understand.

"Say something," he pleaded desperately. "Shoot me, kill me, do anything — but don't look at me like that!" and, fairly writhing, he crawled back to his blanket and buried his head in its depths.

With the coming of evening coolness, Ben again made

preparation for the journey. Neither of the men made reference to the incidents of the day, but on Tom Blair's face there was a new expression, like that of a criminal on his passage from the cell to the hangman's trap. If the younger man saw it, he gave no sign; and as on the night before, they jogged ahead. Before daylight broke, the comparatively smooth bed of Bad River merged into the irregular surface of the Missouri. Then they halted. Why they stopped there, Tom Blair could not at the time tell; but with the coming of daylight he understood. Where he had crossed and Ben had followed there was not now a single track, but many — a score at least. At the margin of the stream, where the cavalcade had stopped, the snow was tramped hard as a stockade; and in the centre of the beaten place, distinct against the white, was a dark spot where a great camp-fire had been built. At the river the party had stopped. Obviously, there the last snow had obliterated the trail, and, seeing that they had turned back, Tom Blair gave a sigh of relief. Whatever the future had in store for him, it could reveal nothing so fearful as a meeting with those whom intuition told him had made up that party.

But his relief was short-lived. Again, after they had breakfasted from the grouse in the pack, Ben ordered the onward march, along the bank of the great river. As they moved ahead, a realization of their destination at last came to the captive, and for the first time he balked.

"Do what you wish with me," he cried. "I'll not go a step farther."

They were perhaps a mile down the river. The bordering hills enclosed them like an arena.

"Very well." Ben Blair spoke as though the occurrence were one of every-day repetition. "Give me your clothes!"

Tom's face settled stubbornly.

"You 'll have to take them."

The youth's hand sought his hip, and a bullet spat at the snow within three inches of the other's feet. There was a meaning pause. Slowly the bravado left the other's face.

"Don't keep me waiting!" urged Ben.

Slowly, very slowly, off came the captive's coat and vest. Despite his efforts, the hands which loosened the buttons trembled uncontrollably. Following the vest came the shirt, then a shoe, and the sock beneath. His foot touched the snow. For the first time a faint realization of the thing he was choosing came to him. The vicious bite of the frost upon the bare skin was not a possibility of the future, but a condition of the immediate now; and he weakened. But in the moment of his indecision, the wave of stubbornness and of blinding hate again flooded him, and a rush of hot curses left his lips.

For a moment, the last time in their lives, the two men eyed each other fairly. Indescribable hate was written upon one face; the other was as blank as the surrounding snow. Its very immobility chilled Tom Blair and cowed him into silence. Without a word he replaced shoe and coat and took up his blanket. An advancing step sounded behind him, and, understanding, he moved ahead. After

a while the foot-fall again gained upon him, and once more the walk merged into the interminable jog-jog of the back-trail.

It was morning when the two began that last relay. It was four o'clock in the afternoon when they arrived amid the outskirts of the scattered prairie terminus which was their destination. Within ten minutes thereafter the two had separated. The older man, in charge of a lank, unshaven frontiersman, chiefly noticeable from a quid of tobacco which swelled one cheek like an abscess, and a nickle-plated star which he wore on the lapel of his coat, was headed for the pretentious white painted building known as the court-house. The younger, catching sight of a wind-twisted sign lettered "Hotel," made for it as though sighting the promised land. In the office, as he passed through, was a crowd of men entirely too large to have gathered by chance in a frontier hostelry, who eyed him peculiarly; but he took no notice, and five minutes later, upon the bedraggled bed of the unplastered upper room that the landlord gave him, without even his boots removed, he was deep in the realm of oblivion.

Some time later — he had no idea of the hour save that all was dark — he was awakened by a confusion of voices in the room below, a slamming of doors, a thumping of great boots upon the bare floor. Scarcely remembering his whereabouts, he rolled from his bed and thrust his head out of the narrow window. Here and there about the town were scattered lights — some stationary, others, which he took to be lanterns, moving. On the

street beneath his window two men went by on a run. Half way up the block, before the well-lighted front of a saloon, a motley crowd was shifting back and forth, restless as ants in a hill, the murmur of their voices sounding menacing as the distant hum of swarming bees. All at once from out the door there burst fair into the crowd a heavy man with great shoulders and a bull neck. About him, even in the uncertain light, there seemed to the watcher something very familiar. What he said, Ben could not understand; but he turned his head this way and that, and his motions were unmistakable. The crowd made way before him as sheep before a dog, and closing behind followed steadily in his wake. Gradually as the leader advanced the mass gained momentum. At first the pace had been a slow walk. In the space of seconds it became a swift one, then a run, with a wild scramble by those in the rear to gain front place. The frozen ground rumbled under their rushing feet. The direction of their movement, at first uncertain, became definite. It was a direct line for the centrally located court-house; and, no longer doubtful of their purpose, Ben left the window, fairly tumbled downstairs, and rushed through the now deserted office into the equally deserted street.

The court-house square was but two blocks away; but the mob had a good lead, and when the youth arrived he found the space within the surrounding chain fence fairly covered. Where the people could all have come from struck him even at that moment as a mystery. Certainly all told the town could not in itself have mustered half the number. Elbowing his way among them, however,

he began soon to understand. Here and there among the mass he caught sight of familiar faces, — Russell of the ® Ranch, Stetson of the "XI," each taking no part, but with hats slouched low over their eyes watching every movement of the drama. Passing around a jam he could not press through, Ben felt a detaining hand upon his arm, and turning, he was face to face with Grannis. The grip of the overseer tightened.

"I 've been looking for you, Blair," he said. "I know what you 've been trying to do, but most of the crowd don't and won't. They 're ugly. You 'd better keep back."

For answer Ben eyed the cowboy squarely.

"I thought I left you in charge of the ranch," he said evenly.

The weather-stained face of the foreman reddened in the shifting lantern light, but the eyes did not drop.

"I have been. I just got here." A dignity which well became him spoke in the steady voice. "I had a reason for coming."

Ben released his gaze.

"The others are here too?"

"No, they 're all at the ranch. Graham and I attended to that."

"I just saw Russell and Stetson. They could n't possibly have got here to-day from home. Has — has this been planned?"

Grannis nodded. "Yes. Kennedy and his gang have been watching here and at the ranch for days. They thought you 'd show up at one place or the other. The whole country is out. There are lots of strangers here,

from ranches I never heard of before. Seems as though everybody knew Rankin and heard of his being shot. You 'd better let them have it their way. It 'll amount to the same in the end, and death itself could n't stop them now."

He took a step forward; for Ben, understanding all, had at last moved on.

"Blair!" he called after him, again extending a detaining hand. His voice took on a new note — intimate, personal, a tone of which no one would have thought it capable. "Blair, listen to me! Stop!"

But he might as well have spoken to the swiftly flowing water beneath the ice of the great river. Of a sudden, from out a passage leading into the cell-room of the court-house basement, a black swarm of men had emerged, bearing by sheer animal force a struggling object in their midst. The silence of those who waited, the lull before the storm, on the instant ended. A very Babel of voices took its place. By common consent, as though drawn by centripetal force, actors and spectators crowded together until they were a solid block of humanity. Caught in the midst, Grannis and Ben alike could for a moment but move with the mass. So fierce was the crush that their very breath seemed imprisoned in their lungs.

Like molten metal the crowd began to flow — to the right, in the direction of the railroad track. With each passing moment the confusion was, if possible, greater than before. Here and there a cowboy, unable to control his excess of feeling, emptied his revolver into the air. Once Ben heard the wailing yelp of a dog caught under

foot of the mass. To his left, a little man with a white collar, obviously a mere spectator, pleaded loudly to be released from the pressure. Adding to the confusion, the bell on the town-hall began ringing furiously.

On they went, a hundred yards, two hundred, reached the railroad track, stopped. In the midst of the leaders, looming over their heads, was a whitened telegraph pole. Of a sudden a lariat shot up over the painted cross-arm, and dropped, the two ends dangling free; and, understanding it all, the spectators again became silent. Everything moved like clockwork. From somewhere in the darkness a bare-backed pony was produced and brought directly under the dangling rope. Astride him a dark-bearded figure with hands tied behind his back was placed and firmly held. Swiftly a running noose, fashioned from the ends of the lariat, was slipped over the captive's neck. A man grasped the bit of the mustang. Before him, the crowd began to give way. The great bull-necked leader — Mick Kennedy, every one now saw it was — held up his hand for silence, and turned to the helpless figure astride the pony.

"Tom Blair!" he said, — and such was now the silence that a whisper would have been audible, — "Tom Blair, have you anything you wish to say?"

The dark shape took no notice. Apparently it did not hear.

Mick Kennedy hesitated. Upon his lips a repetition of the question was forming — but it got no farther. In the midst of the mass of spectators there was a sudden tumult, a scattering from one spot as from a lighted bomb.

"Make way!" demanded an insistent voice. "Let me through!" And for a moment, forgetting the other interest, the spectators turned to this newer one.

At first they could distinguish nothing perfectly; then amidst the confusion they made out the form of a long-armed, long-faced youth, his head lowered, his shoulder before him like a wedge, crowding his way to the fore.

"Make room there!" he repeated. "Make room!" and again into the crowd, like a snow-plough into a drift, he penetrated until his momentum was exhausted, then paused for a fresh plunge.

But before him a pathway was forming. Seemingly the thing was impossible, but the trick of a spoken name was sufficient.

"It 's Ben Blair!" someone had announced, and others had loudly taken up the cry. "It 's Ben Blair! Let him through!"

Along the pathway thus cleared the youth made his way and approached the centre of activity. Previously the drama had moved swiftly, — so swiftly that the spectators could merely watch developments, but under the interruption it halted. The man at the pony's bridle — cowboy Buck it was — paused, uncertain what to do, doubtful of the intent of the long-faced man who so suddenly had come beside him. Not so Mick Kennedy. Well he knew what was in store, and reaching over he gave the pony a resounding slap on the flank.

"Let him go, Buck!" he commanded of the cowboy. "Hurry!"

But already he was too late. With a grip like a trap, Ben's hand was likewise on the rein, holding the little beast, despite his struggles, fairly in his tracks. Ben's head turned, met the bartender's Cyclopean eye squarely, and held it with a look this bulldozer of men had never before received in all his checkered career.

"Mick Kennedy," he said quietly, "another move like that, and in five minutes you 'll be hanging from the other side."

For the fraction of a second there was a pause; but, short as it was, the Irishman felt the sweat start. "The day of such as you has passed, Mick Kennedy."

There was no time for more. As bystanders gather around a street fight, the grim cowmen had closed in from all sides. On the outskirts men mounted each other's shoulders the better to see. Of a sudden, from behind, Ben felt himself grasped by a multitude of hands. Angry voices sounded in his ears.

"String him up too if he interferes!" suggested one.

"That 's the talk!" echoed a third. "Swing him, too!"

The lust of blood was upon the crowd, crying to be satisfied. But they had reckoned wrongly, and were soon to learn their error. Every atom of the long youth's fighting blood was raised to boiling pitch. On the instant, the all but superhuman strength at which we marvel in the insane was his. Like flails, his doubled fists shot out in every direction, meeting resistance at each blow. By the dim light he caught the answering glint on sheath knives, but he took no notice. His hat had come off, and his abundant brown hair shook about his shoulders. His blue

eyes blazed. A figure of war incarnate he stood, and a vacant circle which no one cared to cross formed about him. One long hand, with fingers outstretched, was raised above his head. The brilliant eyes searched the surrounding sea of faces for those he knew; as one by one he found them, lingered, conquered. Silence fell intense.

"Men! Gentlemen!" The words went out like pistol-shots, reaching every acute ear. "Listen to me. I've a right to speak. Stop a moment, all of you, and think. This is the twentieth century, not the first. We're in America, free America. Think, I say, think! Don't act blindly! Think! This man is guilty. We all know it. He's caught red-handed. But he can't escape. Remember this, men, and think! As you value your own self-respect, as you honor the country you live in, don't be savages, don't do this deed you contemplate, this thing you've started doing. Let the law take its course!"

The speaker paused for breath, and, as though fascinated by his audacity or something else, friend and enemy remained motionless and waiting. Well fitting the drama was its setting: the darkness of night broken by the flickering lanterns; on the pony the huddled helpless figure with a running noose about its neck; the row upon row of rugged faces, of gleaming eyes!

"Ranchers, stockmen!" rushed on the insistent voice, "you know responsibility; it's to you I'm talking. A principle is at stake here, — the principle of law or of lawlessness. One of these — you know which — has run this range too long; it's gripping us at this moment. Before we can be free we must call it halt. Let's do it

now; don't wait for the next time or the next, but now, now!" Once more he paused, his eyes for the last time making the circle swiftly, his hand in the air, palm forward. "For law, the law of J. L. Rankin, instead of Judge Lynch!" he challenged. "For civilization instead of savagery — not to-morrow but now, now! Help me to uphold the law!"

So swiftly that the spectators scarcely realized what he was doing, he stepped over to the limp figure upon the pony, loosed the noose from around the neck, and lifted him to the ground.

"Sheriff Ralston!" he called; "come and take your prisoner! Russell! Stetson! Grannis!" designating each by name, "every man who values life, help me now!"

The cry was the trumpet for action. Instantly every one was in motion. Again arose the Babel of voices, — voices cursing, arguing, encouraging. The circle of malevolent faces which had surrounded the youth would not longer be stayed, closed hotly in. He felt the press of their bodies against his, their breath in his face. With an effort, marking his place, the extended right hand went up once more into the air. The slogan again sprang to his tongue.

"For the law of J. L. Rankin, men! The law of —"

The sentence died on his lips. Suddenly, something lightning-like, scorching hot, caught him beneath his right shoulder-blade. Before his eyes the faces, the lighted lanterns, faded into darkness. A sound like falling waters roared in his ears.

CHAPTER XVI

THE QUICK AND THE DEAD

WHEN Ben Blair again woke to consciousness the sunlight was pouring upon him steadily. He was in a strange bed in a strange room; and he looked about him perplexedly. Amid the unfamiliarity his eye caught an object he recognized, — the broad angular back of a man. Memory slowly adjusted itself.

"Grannis —"

The back reversed, showing a rather surprised face.

"Where am I, Grannis?"

The foreman came over to the bed. "In the hotel. In the bridal chamber, they informed me, to be exact."

Ben did not smile. Memory was clear now. "What happened after they — got me last night?"

Grannis's face showed distinct animation. "A lot of things — and mighty fast. You missed the best part." Of a sudden he paused and looked at his charge doubtfully. "But I forgot. You're not to talk: the doctor said so."

Ben made a grimace. "But I can listen, can't I?"

"I suppose so," still doubtfully.

"Well —"

Grannis hearkened equivocally. No one was about, likely to overhear him disobeying instructions, and the temptation was strong.

"You know McFadden?" he queried suddenly.

Blair nodded.

"Well, say, that Scotchman is a tiger. He got to the front somehow when you called for reinforcements, and when you went down he was Johnny-on-the-spot taking your place. Some of the rest of us got in there pretty soon, and for a bit things was lively. It was rather close range for gun-work, but knives were as thick as frogs after a shower." With a sudden movement Grannis slipped up the sleeve of his left arm, showing a bandage through which the blood had soaked and dried. "All of us got scratched some. One fellow of the opposition — Mick Kennedy — met with an accident."

"Serious?"

"Rather. We planted him after things had quieted down."

For a moment the two men looked at each other steadily, and the subject was dropped.

"Well," suggested Blair once more.

"That's all, I guess — except that Ralston has the prisoner." A grim reminiscent smile came to the speaker's lips. "That is, he's got him if the floors of the cells here are paved good and thick. Last time I saw T. Blair he was fairly shaking post-holes into the ground with his feet."

Ben tried to shift in bed, but with the movement a sudden pain made him grit his teeth to keep from

uttering a groan. For the first time he thought of himself.

"How much am I hurt, Grannis?" he queried directly.

The foreman busied himself doing nothing about the room. "You?" cheerfully. "Oh, you're all right."

Ben looked at the other narrowly. "Nothing to bother about, I judge?"

"No, certainly not."

Beneath the bedclothes the long body lifted, but despite anything it could do the face went pale.

"Very well, I guess I'll get up then."

Instantly Grannis was beside him, motioning him back, genuine concern upon his face.

"No, please don't. Not yet."

"But if I'm not hurt much —"

Grannis fingered his forelock in obvious discomfort.

"Well, between you and me, it's this way. They ripped a seam for you — so far," he indicated, "and it's open yet."

Turning his free left arm, Ben touched the bandage at his side, and the hand came back moist and red. Now that it occurred to him, he was ridiculously weak.

"I see. I'm liable to rip it more," he commented slowly.

The other nodded. "Yes; don't talk. I ought to have stopped you before this."

"Grannis!" There was no escaping the blue eyes this time. "Honestly, now, am I liable to be — done for, or not?"

The foreman became instantly serious. "Honest, if

you keep quiet you're all right. Doc said so not an hour ago. At first he thought different, that you'd never wake up; you bled like a pig with its throat cut; but this is what he told me when he left. 'Keep him quiet. It may take a month for that gap to heal, but if you're careful he'll pull through.'" Again the look of concern, and this time of contrition as well. "I ought to be ashamed of myself for letting you talk at all; but this is straight. Now don't say any more."

This time Ben obeyed. He couldn't well do otherwise. He had suddenly grown weak and drowsy, and almost before Grannis was through speaking he was again asleep.

The doctor was right about the time of healing. During the remainder of that month and well into the next, despite his restless protests, Ben Blair was a prisoner in that dull little room; and through it all Grannis remained with him.

"You don't have to stay with me unless you like," Ben had said more than once; but each time Grannis had displayed his own wound, at first openly, at last, carefully concealed by bandages, whimsically.

"Got to take good care of this arm of mine," he explained. "Blood poisoning's liable to set in at any minute, and that's something awful, they tell me."

The invalid made no comment.

It was the evening following the afternoon of Blair's return to the R ranch. In the cosey kitchen, around the new range which Rankin had imported the previous Fall, sat three people, — Grannis, Graham, and Ma Graham.

The two men were smoking steadily and silently. The woman, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes glued to the floor, was breathing loudly with the difficulty of the very corpulent. Of a sudden, interrupting, the door connecting with the room adjoining opened and Ben Blair appeared.

"Grannis," he requested, "come here a moment, please."

In silence Blair closed the door behind them, motioned his companion to a seat, and took another opposite him. He was very quiet, even for his taciturn self; and, glancing at a heap of papers on a near-by table, Grannis understood. For a long minute the two men eyed each other silently. Not without result had they lived the events of the last months together. It was the younger man who first spoke.

"Grannis," he said impassively, "I 'm going to ask you a question, and I want an honest answer. Whatever you may think it leads to must cut no figure. Will you give it?"

Equally impassively the elder man nodded, "Yes."

Blair selected a paper from the litter, and looked at it steadily. "What I want to know is this: have I, has anyone, no matter what the incentive may be, the right to make known after another's death things which during that person's life were carefully concealed?"

The steady gaze shifted to his companion, held there compellingly. "In other words, is a tragedy any less a tragedy, any more public property, because the actors are dead? Answer me honest, Grannis."

Impassively as before the overseer shook his head.

"No, I think not," he said. "Let the dead past bury its dead."

A moment longer the other remained motionless, then, before his companion realized what he was doing, Ben had opened the door of the sheet-iron heater and tossed the paper in his fingers fair among the glowing coals.

"Thank you, Grannis," he said, "I agree with you." He stood a second looking into the suddenly kindled blaze. "As you say, to the living, life. Let the dead past bury its dead."

The flame died down until upon the coals lay a thin, curling film of carbon. Grannis shifted in his seat.

"Nevertheless," he commented indifferently, "you 've done a foolish act." A pause; then he went on deliberately as before. "You 've destroyed the only evidence that proves you Rankin's son."

Involuntarily Blair stiffened, seeming about to speak. But he did not. Instead, he closed the stove and resumed his former seat.

"By the way," he digressed, "I just received a letter from Scotty Baker. I wrote him some time ago about — Mr. Rankin. He answered from England."

Grannis made no comment, and, the conversation being obviously at an end, after a bit he rose, and with a taciturn "Good-night," left the room.

Days and weeks passed. The dead rigor of Winter gave way to traces of Spring. On the high places the earth began to turn brown, the buffalo grass to peep into view. By day the water slushed under the feet of the cattle, and

ran merrily in the draws of the rolling country. By night it froze into marvellous frost-work ; daintier and more intricate of pattern than any made by man. Overhead, flocks of wild ducks in irregular geometric patterns sailed north at double the speed of express trains. With their mellow "Honk — honk," sweetest sound of all to a frontiersman's ears, harbingers of Spring indeed, far above the level of the ducks, amid the very clouds themselves, the geese, in regular triangles, winged their way toward the snow-lands. At first they seemed to pass only by day ; then, as the season advanced, the nights were melodious with the sound of their voices. Themselves invisible, far below on the surface of earth the swish of their migratory wings sounded so distinctly that to a listening human ear it almost seemed it were a troop of angels passing overhead.

After them came the myriad small birds of the prairie, — the countless flocks of blackbirds, whose "fl-ee-ce," in continuous chorus filled all the daylight hours ; the meadow-larks, singly or in pairs, announcing their arrival with a guttural "tuerk" and a saucy flit of the tail, or admonishing "fill your tea-kettle, fill your tea-kettle" with a persistence worthy a better cause.

Ere this the earth was bare and brown. The chatter of the snow streams had ceased. In the high places, on southern slopes, there was even a suggestion of green. At last, on the sunny side of a knoll, there peeped forth the blue face of an anemone. The following day it had several companions. Within a week a very army of blue had arrived, stood erect at attention so far as the eye could reach and beyond. No longer was there a doubt of the

season. Not precursors of Spring, but Spring itself had come.

Meanwhile, on the ⌊R ranch everything moved on as of yore. Save on that first night, Ben Blair made no man his confidant, accepted without question his place as Rankin's successor. Most silent of these silent people, he did his work and did it well, burying deep beneath an impenetrable mask his thoughts and feelings. Not until an early Summer was almost come did he make a move. Then at last a note of three sentences went eastward:

"Miss Baker: I'll be in New York in a few days, and if convenient to you will call. The prairies send greetings in advance. I saw the first wild rose of the season to-day.

"Ben Blair."

A week later, after giving directions for the day's work to Grannis one morning, Ben added some suggestions for the days to follow. As to time, they were rather indefinite, and the overseer looked a question.

"I'm going away for a bit," explained Ben, simply, in answer. Then he turned to Graham. "Hitch up the buckboard right away, please. I want you to take me to town in time to catch the afternoon train East."

CHAPTER XVII

GLITTER AND TINSEL

CLARENCE SIDWELL — Chad, his friends called him — leaned farther back in the big wicker chair, with an involuntary motion adjusted his well-creased trousers so there might be no tension at the knees, and looked across the tiny separating table at his *vis-a-vis*, while his eyelids whimsically tightened.

"Well," he queried, "what do you think of it?"

The little brunette, his companion, roused herself almost with a start, while a suggestion of conscious red tinged her face. "I beg your pardon?" she said, inquiringly.

The man smiled. "Forgotten already, was n't I?" he bantered.

"No, certainly not. I —"

A hand, delicate and carefully manicured as a woman's, was raised in protest. "Don't prevaricate, please. The occasion is n't worth it." The hand returned to the chair-arm with a play of light upon the solitaire it bore. The smile broadened. "You were caught. Confess, and the sentence will be lighter."

As a wave recedes, the red flood began to ebb from the girl's face. "I confess, then. I was — thinking."

"And I was — forgotten. My statement was correct."

She looked up, and the two smiled companionably.

"Admitted. I await the penalty."

The man's expression changed into mock sternness. "Very well, Miss Baker; having heard your confession and remembering a promise to exercise clemency, this court is about to impose sentence. Are you prepared to listen?"

"I 'm growing stronger every minute."

The court frowned, the heavy black eyebrows making the face really formidable.

"I fear the defendant does n't realize the enormity of the offence. However, we 'll pass that by. The sentence, Miss Baker, brings me back to the starting-point. You are directed to answer the question just propounded, the question which for some inexplicable reason you did n't hear. What do you think of it — this roof-garden, and things in general?" The stern voice paused; the brows relaxed, and he smiled again. "But first, you 're sure you won't have something more — an ice, a wee bottle — anything?"

The girl shook her head.

"Then let 's make room here at this table for a better man; to hint at vacating for a better woman would be heresy! It 's pleasanter over there in the corner out of the light, where one can see the street."

They found a vacant bench behind a skilfully arranged screen of palms, and Sidwell produced a cigar.

"In listening to a tale or a confession," he explained, "one should always call in the aid of nicotine. I fancy Munchausen's listeners must have been smokers."

The girl steadily inspected the dark mobile face, half concealed in the shadow. "You 're making sport of me," she announced presently.

Instantly her companion's smile vanished. "I beg your pardon, Miss Baker, but you misunderstood. I thought by this time you knew me better than that."

"You really are interested, then? Would you truly like to know — what you asked?"

"I truly would."

Florence hesitated. Her breath came a trifle more quickly. She had not yet learned the trick of repression of the city folk.

"I think it 's wonderful," she said. "Everything is wonderful. I feel like a child in fairyland; only the fairies must be giants. This great building, for instance, — I can't make it seem a product of mere six-foot man! In spite of myself, I keep expecting a great genie to emerge somewhere. I suppose this seems silly to you, but it 's the feeling I have, and it makes me realize my own insignificance."

Sidwell smoked in silence.

"That 's the first impression — the most vivid one, I think. The next is about the people themselves. I 've been here nearly a half-year now, but even yet I stare at them — as you caught me staring to-night — almost with open mouth. To see these men in the daylight hours down town one would think they cared more for a minute than for their eternal happiness. I 'm almost afraid to speak to them, my little affairs seem so tiny in comparison with the big ones it must take to make men work as they

do. And then, a little later, — apparently for no other reason than that the sun has ceased to shine, — I see them, as here, for instance, unconscious that not minutes but hours are going by. They all seem to have double lives. I get to thinking of them as Jekylls and Hydes. It makes me a bit afraid."

Still Sidwell smoked in silence, and Florence observed him doubtfully. "You really wish me to chatter on in this way?" she asked.

"I was never more interested in my life."

The girl felt her face grow warm. She was glad they were in the shadow, so the man could not see it too clearly. For a moment she looked about her, at the host of skilful waiters, at the crowd of brightly dressed pleasure-seekers, at the kaleidoscopic changes, at the lights and shadows. From somewhere invisible the string orchestra, which for a time had been silent, started up anew, while her answering pulses beat to swifter measure. The air was a familiar one, heard everywhere about town; and she was conscious of a childish desire to join in singing it. The novelty of the scene, the sparkle, the animation, the motion intoxicated her. She leaned back in her seat luxuriously.

"This is life," she murmured. "I never grasped the meaning of the word until within the last few months, but now I begin to understand. To work mightily when one works, to abandon one's self completely when one rests — that is the secret of life."

The man in the shadow shifted his position, and, looking up, Florence found his eyes upon her. "Do you really believe that?" he asked.

"I do, most certainly."

Sidwell lit a fresh cigar, and for a moment the light of the burning match showed his face clearly. He seemed about to say more; but he did not, and Florence too was silent. In the pause that followed, the great express elevator stopped softly at the roof floor. The gate opened with a musical click, and a woman and a man stepped out. Both were immaculately dressed, both had the unmistakable air of belonging to the leisure class. They spied the place Florence and Sidwell had left vacant, and leisurely made their way to it. A waiter appeared, a coin changed hands, an order was given. The man drew out a cigarette case that flashed in colors from the nearby arc-light. Smilingly the woman held a match, and a moment later wreath after wreath of curling blue smoke floated above them into the night.

Florence Baker watched the scene with a strange fascination. She was conscious of having at some time visited a play wherein a similar action had taken place. She had thought it merely a creation of the writer's imagination at the time, but in her present broadened experience she knew better. It was real, — real as the air she breathed. She simply had not known the meaning of life then; she was merely existing. Now she knew!

The waiter returned, bearing something in a cooler. There were a few swift motions, a pop distinctly heard above the drone of the orchestra. The man tossed aside his cigarette and leaned forward. Two glasses with slender stems, each containing a liquid that effervesced and sparkled, one in the man's hand, one in the woman's, met

midway of the board. The empty glasses returned to the table.

Many other seekers of pleasure were about, but Florence had no eyes for them. This pair alone, so indifferent to their surroundings, so thoroughly a part of them, perfectly fulfilled her newly formed conception. They had solved this puzzle of existence, solved it so completely that she wondered it could ever have appealed to her as a puzzle at all. Again the formula, distinct as the handwriting upon the wall, stood revealed before her. One had but to *live* life, not reason it, and all would be well.

Again and again, the delicate glasses sparkled to waiting lips, and returned empty to the table. The man lit another cigarette, and its smoke mingled with the darkness above. In the hands of the waiter the cooler disappeared, and was returned; a second cork popped as had the first. The woman's eyes sparkled as brilliantly as the gems upon her fingers. The languor of the man had passed. With the old action repeated, the brimming glasses touched across the board, were exchanged after the foreign fashion, and again were dry. The figure of the man leaned far over the table. He spoke earnestly, rapidly. Unconscious motions of his hands added emphasis to his words. Neither he nor she who listened was smiling now. Instead, there was a look, identical upon either face, a look somehow strangely familiar to the watcher, one she had met with before, somewhere — somewhere. Memory flew back on lightning wings, searched all the paths of her experience, the dim all-but-forgotten crannies, stopped with pointing finger; and with a tug at

her very being, she looked, and unbelieving looked again. Ah, could it be possible — could it? Yes, there it was, unmistakable; the same expression as this before her — there, blazing from the eyes of a group of strange street-loafers, as she herself, she, Florence Baker, passed by!

In the shadow the face of the spectator crimsoned, the hot flood burned at her ears, a tightness like a physical hand gripped at her throat; but it seemed that her eyes could not leave the figures before her. Not the alien interest of a watcher at the play, but a more intense, a more personal meaning, was in her gaze now. Something of vital moment to her own life was taking place out there so near, and she must see. A fleeting wonder as to whether her own companion was likewise watching came to her, but she did not turn to discover. The denouement, inevitable as death, was approaching, might come if she for an instant looked away.

The man out there under the electric globe was still talking; the woman, his companion, still listened. Florence caught herself straining her ears to hear what he was saying; but to no purpose. She heard only the repressed murmur of his well-modulated, resonant voice; yet that in itself was enough. The old song of the sirens was flowing from his lips, and passion flamed in his eyes. Farther and farther across the tiny intervening table, nearer the woman's face, his own approached. The last empty bottle, the thin-stemmed glasses, stood in his way, and he moved them aside with his elbow. So near now was he that their breaths mingled, and as the drone of his voice

ceased, the music of the orchestra, a waltz, flowed into the rift with its steady one-two-three. He was motionless; but his eyes, intense blue eyes under long lashes, were fixed absorbingly on hers.

It was the woman's turn to move. Gradually, gracefully, unconsciously, her own face came forward toward his. Sparkling in the light, a jewelled hand rested on the surface of the table. A tinge of crimson mounted the long white neck, and colored it to the roots of her hair. The arteries at the throat throbbed under the thin skin. Simultaneously, the opening gate of the elevator clicked, and a man — another with that unmistakable air of leisure — approached; but still she did not notice, did not hear. Instead, with a sudden motion, heedless of surroundings, reckless of spectators, her face crossed the gap intervening between her and her companion; her lips touched his lips, caught fire with the contact, met them again and again.

Watching, scarcely breathing, Florence saw the figure of the man come closer. His eyes also were upon the pair. He caught their every motion; but he did not hurry. On he came, leisurely, impassively, as though out for a stroll. He stopped by their side, a darkening shadow with a mask-like face. Instinctively the two glanced up. There was a crash of glassware, as the tiny table lurched in the woman's hand — and they were on their feet. A moment the three looked into each others' eyes, looked deep and long; then together, without a word, they turned toward the elevator. Again, droning monotonously, the car appeared and disappeared. After

them, vibrant, mocking, there beat the unvarying rhythm of the waltz, one-two-three, one-two-three.

In the shadow, Florence Baker's face dropped into her hands. When at last she glanced up another couple, likewise immaculate of attire, likewise debonair and smiling, were seated at the little table. She turned to her companion. His cigar was still glowing brightly. He had not moved.

"I think I'll go home now, if you please," she said, and every trace of animation had left her voice. "I'm rather tired."

The man roused himself. "It's early yet. There'll be vaudeville here in a little while, after the theatre."

The girl observed him curiously. "It's early, did you say?"

Sidwell smiled indulgently. "Beg your pardon. I had forgotten our standards were not yet in conformity. It is so considered — here."

Florence was very quiet until they reached the steps of her own home. A light was in the open vestibule, another in the library, where Scotty, his feet comfortably enclosed in carpet-slippers and elevated above his head, was reading. Then she turned to her escort.

"You won't be offended, Mr. Sidwell, if I ask you a question?"

The electric light on the nearby corner shone full upon her soft brown face, a very serious face now, and the man's glance lingered there. "Certainly not," he answered.

Florence hesitated. Somehow, now that the moment

for speaking had arrived, the thing she had in mind to say did not seem so easy after all. At last she spoke, hesitatingly: "You seem to be interested in me, seem to take pleasure in being in my company. For the last few months we have been together almost daily, but up to that time we had lived lives as unlike as — as the city is from the prairie. I know you have many other friends, friends you 've known all your life, whose ideals and points of view came from the same experience as your own." She straightened with dignity. "Why is it that you leave those friends to come here? Why do you find pleasure in taking me about as you do? Why is it?"

Not once while she was speaking had the man's eyes left her face; not once had he stirred. Even after she was silent he remained so; and despite the compelling influence which had prompted the question, Florence could not but realize what she had done, what she had all but suggested. The warm color flooded her face, though she held her eyes up bravely. "Tell me why," she repeated firmly.

Sidwell still hesitated. Complex product of the higher civilization, mixture of good and bad, who knows what thoughts were running riot in his brain? At last he aroused and came closer. "You ask me a very hard question," he said steadily; "the most difficult, I think, you could have chosen; one, also, which perhaps I have already asked myself." Again he took a step nearer. "It is a question, Florence, that admits of but one answer; one both adequate and inadequate. It is because you are you and woman, and I am I and man." Of a sudden his

dark face grew swarthier still, his voice lapsed from its customary impersonal. "It means, Florence Baker — "

But the sentence was not completed. As suddenly as the change had come to the man's face, the girl had understood. With an impulse she could not have explained to herself, she had drawn away and swiftly mounted the steps of the house. Not until she reached the porch did she turn.

"Don't, don't, please!" she urged. "I beg your pardon. I should n't have asked what I did. Forget that I spoke at all." She was struggling for words, for breath. Her color came and went. "Good-night." And not trusting herself to look back, oblivious of courtesy, she almost ran into the house.

Standing as she had left him, his hat in his hand, Clarence Sidwell watched her pass through the lighted vestibule into the darkness beyond.

CHAPTER XVIII

PAINTER AND PICTURE

SCOTTY BAKER dropped a lump of sugar into his coffee and stirred the mixture carefully, glancing the while smilingly at his wife and daughter.

"By Jove!" he exclaimed; "it seems good to be back here again."

Mrs. Baker was deep in a letter she had just opened, but Florence returned the smile companionably.

"And it seems mighty good to have you back, daddy," she replied. "Just think of our being alone, a pair of poor defenceless women, three whole months without a man about the house! If you ever dare do it again you're liable to find one in your place when you return. Isn't he, mamma?"

Her mother looked up reproachfully. "For shame, Florence!" she cried.

But Scotty only observed his daughter quizzically. "I did — almost, this time, didn't I?" he bantered. "By the way, who is this wonderful being, this Sidwell, I've heard so much about the last few hours?" He was as obtuse as a post to his wife's meaning look. "Tell me about him, won't you?"

Florence laughed a bit unnaturally. It seemed her words had a way of returning like a boomerang.

"He's a writer," she explained laconically.

"A writer?" Scotty paused, a teaspoonful of coffee between the cup and his mouth. "A real one?"

The smile left the girl's face. "His family is one of the oldest in the city," she explained coldly. "His work sells by the thousand. You can judge for yourself."

Scotty sipped his coffee impassively, but behind the big glasses the twinkle left his eyes.

"The inference you suggest would have been more obvious if you had n't made the first remark," he said a little sharply. "I've noticed the matter of good family has quite an influence in this world."

The subject was dropped, but nevertheless it left its aftermath. Easy-going Scotty did not often say an unpleasant thing, and for that very reason Florence knew that when he did it had an especial significance.

"By the way," he observed after a moment, "we ought to celebrate to-day in some manner. I rather expected to find a band at the station to welcome me yesterday upon my return, but I did n't, and I fear there's been no public demonstration arranged. What do you say to our packing up our dinner, taking the elevated, and spending the day in the country? What say you, Mollie?"

His wife looked at her daughter helplessly. "Just as Florence says. I'm willing," she replied.

"What speaks the oracle?" smiled Scotty. "Shall we or shall we not? Personally, I feel a desire for cooling springs, to step on a good-sized plat of green without having a watchful bluecoat loom in the distance."

Florence fingered the linen of the tablecloth with genuine discomfort. "You two can go. I'll help you get ready," she ventured at last. "I'm sorry, but I promised Mr. Sidwell last night I'd visit the art gallery with him this afternoon. He says they've some new canvases hung lately, one of them by a particular friend of his. He's such a student of art, and I know so little about it that I hate to miss going."

Again the smile left Scotty's eyes. "Can't you write a note explaining, and postpone the visit until some other time?" It took quite an effort for this undemonstrative Englishman to make the request.

The girl glanced out the window with a look her father understood very well. "I hardly think so," she said. "He's going away for the Summer soon, and his time is limited."

Scotty said no more, and soon after he left the table and went into the library. Florence sat for a moment abstractedly; then with her old impulsive manner she followed him.

"Daddy," the girl's arms clasped around his neck, her cheek pressed against his, "I'm awful sorry I can't go with you to-day. I'd like to, really."

But for one of the very few times that Florence could remember her father did not respond. Instead, he removed her arms rather coldly.

"Oh, that's all right," he said; "I hope you'll have a good time." And picking up the morning paper he lit a cigar and moved toward the shady veranda.

Watching him, the girl had a desire to follow, to pre-

vent his leaving her in that way. But she hesitated and the moment passed.

Yet, although a cloud shadowed Florence Baker's morning, by afternoon it had departed. Sidwell's carriage came promptly, creating something of a stir behind the drawn shades of the adjoining residences — for the Bakers were not located in a fashionable quarter. Sidwell himself, immaculate, smiling, greeted her with the deference which became him well, and in itself conveyed a delicate compliment. Neither made any reference to the incident of the night before. His manner gave no hint of the constraint which under the circumstances might have been expected. A few months before, the girl would have thought he had taken her request literally, and had forgotten; but now she knew better. In this fascinating new life one could pass pleasantries with one's dearest enemy and still smile. In the old life, under similar circumstances, there would have been gun-play, and probably later a funeral; but here — they knew better how to live. Already, in the few social events she had attended, she had seen them juggle with emotions as a conjurer with knives — to emerge unhurt, unruffled. To be sure, she could not herself do it — yet; but she understood, and admired.

Out of doors the sun was uncomfortably hot, but within the high walled gallery it was cool and pleasant. Florence had been there before, but earlier in the season, and many other visitors were present. To-day she and Sidwell were practically alone, and she faced him with a little receptive gesture.

"You're always getting me to talk," she said. "To-day I'm going to exchange places. Don't expect me to do anything but listen."

Sidwell smiled. "Won't you even condescend to suggest channels in which my discourse may flow?" he bantered.

The girl hesitated. "Perhaps," she ventured, "if I find it necessary."

For an hour they wandered about, moving slowly, and pausing often to rest. Sidwell talked well, but somewhat impersonally. At last, in an out-of-the-way corner, they came to the modest canvas of his friend, and they sat down before it. The picture was unnamed and unsigned. Without being extraordinary as a work of art, its subject lent its chief claim to distinction. Interested because her companion seemed interested, Florence looked at it steadily. At first there appeared to her nothing but a mountain, steep and rugged, and a weary man who, climbing it, had lain down to rest. Far down at the mountain's base she saw where the figure had begun its ascent. The way was easy there, and the trail, through the abundant grasses crushed underfoot, was of one who had moved rapidly. Gradually, with the upward incline, obstacles had increased, and the footprints drew nearer together. Still higher, from a straight line the trail had become tortuous and irregular. Here the climber had passed around a thicket of trees; there a great boulder had stood in the path; but, ever indomitable, the way had been steadily upward toward some point the climber had in view. Steeper and steeper the way had grown. The prints on

the rocky mountain-side, from being those of feet only, merged into those made by hands. The man had begun to crawl, making his way inch by inch. Fragments of his torn clothing hung on the points of rocks. Dim brown lines showed the path his body had taken, as he sometimes slipped back. Breaks in the scant vegetation told where his fingers had clutched desperately to halt his descent. Yet each time the reverse had been but temporary; he had returned, and mounted higher and higher. But at last there had come the end. He had reached his present place in the picture. By gripping tightly he could hold his own, but to advance was impossible. Straight above him, a sheer wall, many times his own height, was the blank, unbroken face of the rock. That he had tried to scale even this was evident, for finger-marks from bleeding hands were thick thereon; but he had finally abandoned the effort. Physically, he was conquered. It seemed that one could almost hear the quick coming and going of his breath. Yet, prostrate as he lay, his eyes were turned toward the barrier his body could not scale, to a something which crowned its utmost height,—something indefinite and unattainable,—the supreme desire and purpose of his life.

The two spectators sat silent. Other visitors came near, glanced at the canvas and at the pair of observers, and passed on with muffled footsteps.

The girl turned, and, as on the night at the roof-garden, found the man's eyes upon her.

"What name does your friend give to his work?" she asked.

"He calls it 'The Unattainable.'"

"And what is its meaning?"

"Ambition, perfection, complete happiness — anything striven for with one's whole soul."

Florence was studying her companion now as steadily as he had been studying her a moment before. "To your — friend it meant — "

"Happiness."

The girl's hands were clapsed in her lap in a way she had when her thoughts were concentrated. "And he never found it?" she asked.

Unconsciously one of Sidwell's hands made a downward motion of deprecation. "He did not. We made the circuit of the earth together in pursuit of it — but all was useless. It seemed as though the more he searched the more he was baffled in his quest."

For a moment the girl made no reply, but in her lap her hands clasped tighter and tighter. A thought that made her finger-tips tingle was taking form in her mind. A dim comprehension of the nature of this man had first suggested it; the fact that the canvas was unsigned had helped give it form. The speaker's last words, his even tone of voice, had not passed unnoticed. She turned to the canvas, searched the skilfully concealed outlines of the tattered figure with the upturned eyes. The clasped hands grew white with the tension.

"I did n't know before you were an artist as well as a writer," she said evenly.

Sidwell turned quickly. The girl could feel his look. "I fear," he said, "I fail to grasp your meaning. You think —"

Florence met the speaker's look steadily. "I don't think," she said, "I know. You painted the picture, Mr. Sidwell. That man there on the mountain-side is you!"

Her companion hesitated. His face darkened; his lips opened to speak and closed again.

The girl continued watching him with steady look. "I can hardly believe it," she said absently. "It seems impossible."

Sidwell forced a smile. "Impossible? What? That I should paint a daub like that?"

The girl's tense hands relaxed wearily.

"No, not that you paint, but that the man there — the one finding happiness unattainable — should be you."

The lids dropped just a shade over Sidwell's black eyes. "And why, if you please, should it be more remarkable that I am unhappy than another?"

This time Florence took him up quickly. "Because," she answered, "you seem to have everything one can think of that is needed to make a human being happy — wealth, position, health, ability — all the prizes other people work their lives out for or die for." Again the voice dropped. "I can't understand it." She was silent a moment. "I can't understand it," she repeated.

From the girl's face the man's eyes passed to the canvas, and rested there. "Yes," he said slowly, "I suppose it is difficult, almost impossible, for you to realize why I am — as I am. You have never had the personal experience — and we only understand what we have felt. The trouble with me is that I have experienced too much, felt too much. I've ceased to take things on trust. Like the youth and

the key flower I 've forgotten the best." The voice paused, but the eyes still kept to the canvas.

"That picture," he went on, "typifies it all. I painted it, not because I 'm an artist, but because in a fashion it expresses something I could n't put into words, or express in any other way. When I began to climb, the object above me was not happiness but ambition. Wealth and social place, as you say, I already had. They meant nothing to me. What I wanted was to make a name in another way — as a literary man." The dark eyes shifted back to the listener's face, the voice spoke more rapidly.

"I went after the thing that I wanted with all the power and tenacity that was in me. I worked with the one object in view; worked without resting, feverishly. I had successes and failures, failures and successes — a long line of both. At last, as the world puts it, I *arrived.* I got to a position where everything I wrote sold, and sold well; but in the meantime the thing above me, which had been ambition, gradually took on another shape. Perfection it was I longed for now, perfection in my art. It was not enough that the public had accepted me as I was; I was not satisfied with my work. Try as I might, nothing that I wrote ever reached my own standard in its execution. I worked harder than ever; but it was useless. I was confronting the blank wall — the wall of my natural limitations."

The voice paused, and for a moment lowered. "I won't say what I did then; I was — mad almost — the finger-marks of it are on the rock."

The girl could not look longer into the speaker's eyes.

She felt as if she were gazing upon a naked human soul, and turned away.

"At last," he went on in his confession, "I came to myself, and was forced to see things as they were. I saw that as well as I thought I had understood life I had not even grasped its meaning. I had fancied the attainment of my object the supreme end, and by every human standard I had succeeded in my purpose; but the thing I had gained was trash. Wealth, power, notoriety — what were they? Bubbles, nothing more; bubbles that broke in the hand of him who clasped them. The real meaning and object of existence lay deeper, and had nothing whatever to do with the estimate of a person by his fellows. It was a frame of mind of the individual himself."

Florence's face turned farther away, but Sidwell did not notice. "Then, for the last time," he hurried on, "the unattainable changed form for me, and became what it seems now — happiness. For a little time I think I was happy — happy in merely having made the discovery. Then came the reaction. I was as I was, as I am now — a product of my past life, of a civilization essentially artificial. In striving for a false ideal I had unfitted myself for the real when at last I discovered it."

Unconsciously the man had come closer, and his eyes glowed. At last his apathy was shaken off, and his words came in a torrent. "What I was then I am to-day. Mentally, I am like an inebriate, who no longer finds satisfaction in plain food and drink, but craves stimulants. I demand activity, excitement, change. In every hour of my life I realize the narrowness and artificiality of it

all; but without it I am unhappy. I sometimes think Mother Nature herself has disowned me; when I try to get near her she draws away — I fancy with a shudder. Solitude of desert, of forest, or of prairie is no longer solitude to me. It is filled with voices — accusing voices; and I rush back to the crowd and the unrest of the city. Even my former pleasures seem to have deserted me. You have spoke often of accomplishing big things, doing something better than anyone else can do it, as an example of pleasure supreme. If you realized what you were saying you would know its irony. You cannot do a thing better than anyone else. People, like water, strike a dead level. No matter how you strive, dozens of others can do the thing you are doing. Were you to die, your place would be filled to-morrow, and the world would wag on just the same. There is always someone just beneath you watchfully waiting, ready to seize your place if you relax your effort for a moment. The term 'big things' is relative. To speak it is merely to refer to something you do not personally understand. Nothing seems really big to the one who does it. Nothing is difficult when you understand it. The growing of potatoes in a backyard is just as wonderful a performance as the painting of one of these pictures; it would be more so were it not so common and so necessary. The construction of a steam-engine or an electric dynamo is incomparably more remarkable than the merging of separate thousands of capital into millions of combination, yet multitudes of men everywhere can do either of the former things and are unnoticed. We worship what we do not

understand, and call it big; but the man in the secret realizes the mockery and smiles."

Closer came the dark face. The black eyes, intense and flashing, held the listener in their gaze.

"I said that even my pleasures seem to have deserted me. It is true. I used to like to wander about the city, to see it at its busiest, to loiter amid the hum and the roar and the ceaseless activity. I saw in it then only friendly rivalry, like a hurdle race or a football game — something pleasing and stimulating. Now it all affects me in just the reverse way. I look beneath the surface, and my heart sinks to find not friendly competition, but a battle, where men and women fight for daily bread, where the weak are crowded and trampled upon by the strong. In ordinary battle the maimed and the crippled are spared, but here they still fight on. Mercy or quarter is unknown. Oh, it is ghastly! I used to take pleasure in books, in the work of others; but even this satisfaction has been taken from me — except such grim satisfaction as a physician may feel at a *post mortem*. The very labor that made me a success in literature caused me to be a dissector of things around me. To learn how others attained their ends I must needs tear their work apart and study the fragments. This habit has become a part of me. I overlook the beauty of the product in the working of the machinery that produced it. I watch the mixing of literary confections, served to the reader so that upon laying down the book he may have a good taste in his mouth. People themselves, those I meet from day to day, inevitably go through the same metamorphosis. I

see them as characters in a book. Their foibles and peculiarities are grist for my mill. Everything, everyone, when I appear, slips into the narrow confines of a printed page. I can't even spare myself. Fragments of me can be had for a price at any of the book-stalls. I've become public property — and with no one to blame but myself."

The flow of speech halted. The speaker's face was so near now that the girl could not avoid looking at it.

"Do you wonder," he concluded, "that I am not happy?"

The girl looked up. The two pairs of brown eyes met. Outwardly, she who answered was calm; but in her lap the small hands were clasping each other tightly, so that the blood had left the fingers.

"No, I do not wonder now," she answered simply.

"And you understand?"

"Yes, I — no, there 's so much — Oh, take me home, please!" The sentence ended abruptly in a plea. The slender body was trembling as with cold. "Take me home, please. I want to — to think."

"Florence!" The word was a caress. "Florence!"

But the girl was already on her feet. "Don't say any more to-day! I can't stand it. Take me home!"

Sidwell looked at her closely for a moment; then the mask of conventionality, which for a time had lifted from his face, dropped once more, and he also arose. In silence, side by side, the two made their way down the long hall to the exit. Out of doors, the afternoon sun, serene and smiling, gave them a friendly greeting.

CHAPTER XIX

A VISITOR FROM THE PLAINS

"PAPA," said Florence, next morning, as they two sat alone at breakfast, her mother having reported a headache and failed to appear, "let 's go somewhere, away from folks, for a week or so."

"Why this sudden change of front?" her father queried. "Not being of the enemy I 'm entitled to the plan of campaign, you know."

Florence observed him steadily, and the father could not but notice how much more mature she seemed than the prairie girl of a few months ago.

"There is no change of front or plan of campaign as far as I know," she replied. "I simply want to get away a bit, that 's all." She returned to her neglected breakfast. "There 's such a thing as mental dyspepsia, you know, and I feel a twinge of it now and then. I think this new life is being fed to me in doses too large for my digestion."

Mr. Baker eventually acquiesced, as anyone who knew him could have foretold he would do. His wife, also, when the plan was broached to her, hesitatingly agreed, but at the last moment balked and declined to go; so they left without her.

The small town to which they went had ample grass and trees, and a small lake convenient. A farmer's family reluctantly consented to board and lodge them; also to give them the use of a bony horse and a disreputable one-seated wagon. After their arrival they promptly proceeded to segregate themselves from their fellow-boarders. The first day they fished a little, talked, read, slept, meditated, and smoked — that is, Mr. Baker did, enough for two; and Florence assisted by rolling cigarettes when the bowl of the meerschaum grew uncomfortably hot. The next day they repeated the programme, and also the next, and the next.

"I think I could stay here always," said Mr. Baker.

"I rather like it myself," Florence admitted.

Nevertheless, they returned promptly on schedule-time. Mrs. Baker was awaiting them, her stiff manner indicating that she had not been doing much else while they were away. Without finesse, one member of the two delinquents was informed that a certain man of considerable social prominence, Clarence Sidwell by name, had called daily, and, Mrs. Baker fancied, with increasing dissatisfaction at their absence. Florence found in her mail a short note, which after some consideration she handed without comment to her father.

He read — and read again. "When was this mailed?" he asked.

"Over a week ago," answered Florence. "It has been here for several days."

It was therefore no surprise to the Englishman when that very evening, as he sat on the front veranda, his heels

on the railing, watching the passage of equipages swift and slow, he saw a tall young man, at whom passers-by stared more than was polite, coming leisurely up the sidewalk, inspecting the numbers on the houses. As he came closer, Mr. Baker took in the details of the long free stride, of the broad chest, the square uplifted chin, with something akin to admiration. Vitality and power were in every motion of the supple body; health — a life free as the air and sunshine — was written in the brown of the hands, the tan of the face. Even his clothes, though not the conventional costume of city streets, seemed a part of their wearer, and had a freedom all their own. The broad-brimmed felt hat was obviously for comfort and protection, not for show. The light-brown flannel shirt was the color of the sinewy throat. The trousers, of darker wool, rolled up at the bottom, exposed the high-heeled riding-boots. About the whole man — for he was very near now — there was that immaculate cleanliness which the world prizes more than godliness.

Scotty dropped his feet from the railing and advanced to the steps. "Hello, Ben Blair!" he said.

The visitor paused and smiled. "How do you do, Mr. Baker?" he answered. "I thought I'd find you along here somewhere." He swung up the short walk, and, mounting the steps, grasped the Englishman's extended hand. For a moment the two said nothing. Then Scotty motioned to a chair. "Sit down, won't you?" he invited.

Ben stood as he was. The smile left his face. "Would you really — like me to?" he asked directly.

"I really would, or I would n't have asked you," Scotty returned, with equal directness.

Ben took the proffered chair, and crossed his legs comfortably. The two sat for a moment in silent companionship.

"Tell me about Rankin," suggested Scotty at last.

Ben did so. It did not take long, for he scarcely mentioned himself, and quite omitted that last incident of which Grannis had been witness.

"And — the man who shot him?" Scotty found it a bit difficult to put the query into words.

"They swung him a few days later. Things move rather fast out there when they move at all."

"Were 'they' the cowboys?"

"No, the sheriff and the rest. It was all regular — scarcely any spectators, even, I heard."

"And now about yourself. Shall you be in the city long?"

"I hardly know. I came partly on business — but that won't take me long." He looked at his host significantly. "I also had another purpose in coming."

Scotty moved uncomfortably in his seat. "Ben," he said at last, "I 'd like to ask you to stay with us if I could, but —" he paused, looking cautiously in at the open door — "but Mollie, you know — It would mean the dickens' own time with her."

Ben showed neither surprise nor resentment. "Thank you," he replied. "I understand. I could n't have accepted had you invited me. Let 's not consider it."

Again the seat which usually fitted the Englishman so

well grew uncomfortable. He was conscious that through the curtains of the library window some one was watching him and the new-comer. He had a mortal dread of a scene, and one seemed inevitable.

"How 's the old ranch?" he asked evasively.

"It 's just as you left it. I have n't got the heart somehow to change anything. We use up a good many horses one way and another during a year, and when I get squared around I 'm going to start a herd there with one of the boys to look after it. It was Rankin's idea too."

"You expect to keep on ranching, then?"

"Why not?"

"I thought, perhaps, now that you had plenty to do with — You 're young, you know."

Ben looked out across the narrow plat of turf deliberately.

"Am I — young? Really, I 'd never thought of it in that way."

The Englishman's feet again mounted the railing in an attempt at nonchalance.

"Well, usually a man at your age —" He laughed. "If it were an old fellow like me —"

"Mr. Baker, I thought you said you really wished me to sit down and chat awhile?"

Scotty colored. "Why, certainly. What makes you think —"

"Let 's be natural then."

Scotty stiffened. His feet returned to the floor.

"Blair, you forget —" But somehow the sentence, bravely begun, halted. Few people in real life acted a

part with Benjamin Blair's blue eyes upon them. "Ben," he said instead, "I'm an ass, and I beg your pardon. I'll call Florence."

But the visitor's hand restrained him.

"Don't, please. She knows I am here. I saw her a bit ago. Let her do as she wishes." He drew himself up in the cane rocker. "You asked me a question. As far as I know I shall ranch it always. It suits me, and it's the thing I can do best. Besides, I like being with live things. The only trouble I have," he smiled frankly, "is in selling stock after I raise them. I want to keep them as long as they live, and put them in greener pastures when they get old. It's the off season, but I brought a couple of car-loads along with me to Chicago, to the stock-yards. I'll never do it again. It has to be done, I know; people have to be fed; but I've watched those steers grow from calves."

Scotty searched his brain for something relevant and impersonal, but nothing suggested itself. "Ben Blair," he ventured, "I like you."

"Thank you," said Ben.

They were silent for a long time. Pedestrians, singly and in pairs, sauntered past on the walk. Vehicle after vehicle scurried by in the street. At last a team of brown thoroughbreds, with one man driving, drew up in front of the house. The man alighted, tied the horses to the stone hitching-post, and came up the walk. Simultaneously Ben saw the curtains at the library window sway as though in a sudden breeze.

"Splendid horses, those," he commented.

"Yes," answered Scotty, wishing he were somewhere else just then. "Yes," he repeated, absently.

"Good-evening, Mr. Baker!" said the smiling driver of the thoroughbreds.

"Good-evening," echoed Scotty. Then, with a gesture, he indicated the passive Benjamin. "My friend Mr. Blair, Mr. Sidwell."

Sidwell mounted the steps. Ben arose. The library curtains trembled again. The two men looked each other fairly in the eyes and then shook hands.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Blair," said Sidwell.

"Thank you," responded Ben, evenly.

Down in the depths of his consciousness, Scotty was glad this frontier youth had seen fit to come to town. Taking off his big glasses he polished them industriously.

"Won't you sit down?" he invited the new-comer.

Sidwell moved toward the door. "No, thank you. With your permission I'll go inside. I presume Miss Baker—"

But the Englishman was ahead of him. "Yes," he said, "she's at home. I'll call her," and he disappeared.

Watching the retreating figure, Sidwell's black eyes tightened, but he returned and took the place Scotty had vacated. He gave his companion a glance which, swift as a flash of light upon a sensitized plate, took in every detail of the figure, the bizarre dress, the striking face.

"You are from the West, I judge, Mr. Blair?" he interrogated.

"Dakota," said Ben, laconically.

Sidwell's gaze centred on the sombrero. "Cattle raising, perhaps?" he ventured.

Ben nodded. "Yes, I have a few head east of the river." He returned the other's look, and Sidwell had the impression that a searchlight was suddenly shifted upon him. "Ever been out there?"

The city man indicated an affirmative. "Yes, twice: the last time about four years ago. I went out on purpose to see a steer-roping contest, on the ranch of a man by the name of Gilbert, I remember. A cowboy they called Pete carried off the honors; had his 'critter' down and tied in forty-two seconds. They told me that was slow time, but I thought it lightning itself."

"The trick can be done in thirty-five with the wildest," commented Ben.

Sidwell looked out on the narrow street meditatively. "I think that cowboy exhibition," he went on slowly, "was the most typically American scene I have ever witnessed. The recklessness, the dash, the splendid animal activity — there's never been anything like it in the world." His eyes returned to Ben's face. "Ever hear of Gilbert, did you?"

"I live within twenty-three miles of him."

Sidwell looked interested. "What ranch, if I may ask?"

"The Right Angle Triangle we call it."

"Oh, yes," Sidwell nodded in recollection. "Rankin is the proprietor — a big man with a grandfather's-shay buckboard. I saw him while I was there."

Involuntarily one of Ben's long legs swung over the other. "That 's the place! You have a good memory."

Sidwell smiled. "I could n't help having in this case. He reminded me of the satraps of ancient Persia. He was monarch of all he surveyed."

Ben said nothing.

"He 's still the big man of the country, I presume?"

"He is dead."

"Dead?"

"I said so."

The light of understanding came to the city man. "I see," he observed. "He is gone, and you —"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Sidwell," interrupted the other, "but suppose we change the subject?"

Sidwell colored, then he laughed. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Blair. No offence was intended, I assure you. Mr. Rankin interested me, that was all."

Again Ben said nothing, and the conversation lapsed.

Meanwhile within doors another drama had been taking place. A very discomposed young lady had met Scotty just out of hearing.

"What made you stop Mr. Sidwell, papa?" she asked indignantly. "Why did n't you let him come in?"

"Because I did n't choose to," explained Scotty, bluntly.

"But I wanted him to," she said imperiously. "I don't care to see Ben to-night."

Her father looked at her steadily. "And I wish you to see him," he insisted. "You must be hypnotized to behave the way you 're doing! You forget yourself completely!"

The brown eyes of the girl flashed. "And you forget yourself! I'm no longer a child! I won't see him to-night unless I wish to!"

Easy-going Scotty was aroused. His weak chin set stubbornly.

"Very well. You will see neither of them, then. I won't have a man insulted without cause in my own house. I'll tell them both you're sick."

"If you do," flamed Florence, "I'll never forgive you! You're — horrid, if you are my father. I —" She took refuge in tears. "Oh, you ought to be ashamed to treat your daughter so!"

The Englishman flicked a speck of ash off his lounging coat. "I *am* ashamed," he admitted; "but not of what you suggest." He turned toward the door.

"Daddy," said a pleading voice, "don't you — care for me any more?"

An expression the daughter had never seen before, but one that ever after haunted her, flashed over the father's face.

"Care for you?" he exclaimed. "Care for you? That is just the trouble! I care for you — have always cared for you — too much. I have sacrificed my self-respect to humor you, and it's all been a mistake. I see it now too late."

For a moment the two looked at each other; then the girl brushed past him. "Very well," she said calmly, "if I must see them both, at least permit me to see them by myself."

The men on the porch arose as Florence appeared.

Their manner of doing so was characteristic of each. Sidwell got to his feet languidly, a bit stiffly. He had not forgotten the past week. Ben Blair arose respectfully, almost reverently, unconscious that he was following a mere social form. Six months had passed since he had seen this little woman, and his soul was in his eyes as he looked at her.

Just without the door the girl halted, her color like the sunset. It was the city man she greeted first.

"I 'm very glad to see you again," she said, and a dainty hand went out to meet his own.

Sidwell was human. He smiled, and his hand detained hers longer than was really necessary.

"And I 'm happy indeed to have you back," he responded. "I missed you."

The girl turned to the impassive but observing Benjamin.

"I am glad to see you, too, Mr. Blair," she said, but the voice was as formal as the handshake. "Papa introduced you to Mr. Sidwell, I suppose?"

Her reserve was quite unnecessary. Outwardly, Ben was as coldly polite as she. He placed a chair for her deferentially and took another himself, while Sidwell watched the scene with interest. Somewhere, some time, if he lived, that moment would be reproduced on a printed page.

"Yes," responded Ben, "Mr. Sidwell and I have met." He turned his chair so that he and the girl faced each other. "You like the city, your new life, as well as you expected, I trust?"

They chatted a few minutes as impersonally as two

chance acquaintances meeting by accident; then again Ben arose. "I judge you were going driving," he said simply. "I'll not detain you longer."

Florence melted. Such delicate consideration was unexpected.

"You must call again while you are in town," she said.

"Thank you, I shall," Ben responded.

Sidwell felt that he too could afford to be generous.

"If there's anything in the way of amusement or otherwise that I can do for you, Mr. Blair, let me know," he said, proffering his address. "I am at your service at any time."

Ben had reached the walk, but he turned. For a moment wherein Florence held her breath he looked steadily at the city man.

"We Western men, Mr. Sidwell," he said at last slowly, "are more or less solitaries. We take our recreation as we do our work, alone. In all probability I shall not have occasion to accept your kindness. But I may call on you before I leave." He bowed to both, and replaced his hat. A "good-night" and he was gone.

Watching the tall figure as it disappeared down the street, Sidwell smiled peculiarly. "Rather a positive person, your friend," he remarked.

Like an echo, Florence took up the word. "Positive!" The small hands pressed tightly together in the speaker's lap. "Positive! You didn't get even a suggestion of him by that. I saw a big prairie fire once. It swept over the country for miles and miles, taking everything clean; and the men fighting it might have been so many

children in arms. I always think of it when I think of Ben Blair. They are very much alike."

The smile left Sidwell's face. "One can start a back-fire on the prairie," he said reflectively. "I fancy the same process might work successfully with Blair also."

"Perhaps," admitted Florence. The time came when both she and Sidwell remembered that suggestion.

But the subject was too large to be dropped immediately.

"Something tells me," Sidwell added, after a moment, "that you are a bit fearful of this Blair. Did the gentleman ever attempt to kidnap you — or anything?"

Florence did not smile. "No," she answered.

"What was it, then? Were you in love, and he cold — or the reverse?"

Florence dropped her chin into her hands. "To be frank with you, it was — the reverse; but I would rather not speak of it." She was silent for a moment. "You are right, though," she continued, rather recklessly, "when you say I'm afraid of him. I don't dare think of him, even. I want to forget he was ever a part of my life. He overwhelms me like sleep when I'm tired. I am helpless."

Unconsciously Sidwell had stumbled upon the closet which held the skeleton. "And I — " he queried, "are you afraid of me?"

The girl's great brown eyes peered out above her hands steadily.

"No; with us it is not of you I'm afraid — it's of myself." She arose slowly. "I'm ready to go driving if you wish," she said.

CHAPTER XX

CLUB CONFIDENCES

LATE the same evening, in the billiard-room of the "Loungers Club" Clarence Sidwell met one Winston Hough, seemingly by chance, though in fact very much the reverse. Big and blonde, addicted to laughter, Hough was one of the few men with whom Sidwell fraternized, — why, only the Providence which makes like and unlike attract each other could have explained. However, it was with deliberate intent that Sidwell entered the most brilliantly lighted room in the place and sought out the group of which Hough was the centre.

"Hello, Chad!" the latter greeted the new-comer. "I've just trimmed up Watson here, and I'm looking for new worlds to conquer. I'll roll you fifty points to see who pays for a lunch afterward."

Sidwell smiled tolerantly. "I think it would be better for my reputation to settle without playing. Put up your stick and I'm with you."

Hough shook his head. "No," he objected, "I'm not a Weary Willie. I prefer to earn my dole first. Come on."

But Sidwell only looked at him. "Don't be stubborn," he said. "I want to talk with you."

Hough returned his cue to the rack lingeringly. "Of course, if you put it that way there 's nothing more to be said. As to the stubbornness, however —" He paused suggestively.

Sidwell made no comment, but led the way directly toward the street.

"What 's the matter?" queried Hough, when he saw the direction they were taking. "Is n't the club grill-room good enough for you?"

Sidwell pursued his way unmoved. "I said I wished to talk with you."

"I guess I must be dense," Hough answered gayly. "I certainly never saw any house rules that forbid a man to speak."

Sidwell looked at his companion with a whimsical expression. "The trouble is n't with the house rules but with you. A fellow might as well try to monopolize the wheat-pit on the board of trade as to keep you alone here. You 're too confoundedly popular, Hough! You draw people as the proverbial molasses-barrel attracts flies."

The big man laughed. "Your compliment, if that 's what it was, is a bit involved, but I suppose it 'll have to do. Lead on!"

Sidwell sought out a modest little *café* in a side street and selected a secluded booth.

"What 'll you have?" he asked, as the waiter appeared.

Hough's blue eyes twinkled. "Are you with me, whatever I order?"

Sidwell nodded.

"Club sandwiches and a couple of bottles of beer," Hough concluded.

His companion made no comment.

"Been some time, has n't it, since you surprised your stomach with anything like this?" bantered the big man, when the order had arrived and the waiter departed.

Sidwell smiled. "I shall have to confess it," he admitted.

"I thought so," remarked Hough dryly. "Next time you depict a plebeian scene you can remember this and thank me."

This time Sidwell did not smile. "You 're hitting me rather hard, old man," he said.

"You deserve it," laconically answered Hough.

"But not from you!"

Hough meditatively watched the beads bursting on the surface of the liquor.

"Admitted," he said; "but the people who ought to touch you up are afraid to do so, and someone ought to." He smiled across the table. "Pardon the brutal frankness, but it 's true."

Sidwell returned the glance. "You think it 's the duty of some intimate to perform the kindness of this — touching up process occasionally, do you?"

Hough drank deep and sighed with satisfaction. "Jove! that tastes good! I limbered up my joints with a two-mile walk before I went to the club this evening, and I 've been as dry as a harvest-hand ever since. All the wine in France or elsewhere won't touch the spot like a little good old brew when a man is really healthy." He recalled himself. "Your pardon, Sidwell. Seriously, I do think

it 's the duty of our best friends to bring us back to earth now and then when we 've strayed too far away. No one who does n't care for us will take the trouble."

"Our *very* best friends, I judge," suggested Sidwell.

"Certainly." The big man wondered what was coming next.

"A — wife, for instance."

Hough straightened in his chair. His jolly face grew serious.

"Are you in earnest, Chad," he queried, "or are you just drawing me out?"

"I never was more in earnest in my life."

Hough lost sight of the original question in the revelation it suggested.

"Do you mean you 're really going to get married at last?"

Sidwell forced a smile. "If the matter were already settled, it would be too late to consider the advisability of the move, would n't it?" he returned. "It would be an established fact, and as such useless to discuss. I have n't asked the lady, if that answers your question."

Hough made a gesture of impatience. "Theoretically, yes, but practically, no. In your individual case, desire and gratification amount to the same. You 're mighty fascinating with the ladies, Chad. Few women would refuse you, if you made an effort to have them do the reverse."

"Thank you," said Sidwell, equivocally.

His companion scowled. "Appreciation is unnecessary. I 'm not even sure the remark was complimentary."

They sat a moment in silence, while the beer in their glasses grew stale.

"Suppose I were to consider marriage, as you suggest," said Sidwell at last. "What do you think would be the result? Judging from your expression, some opinion thereon is weighing heavily upon your mind."

The blonde man looked up keenly. One would hardly have recognized him as the easy-going person of a few moments before.

"It will, of course, depend entirely upon whom you choose. That 's hackneyed. From the motions of straws, though, this Summer, I presume it 's admissible that I jump at conclusions concerning the lady."

The other nodded.

"In that case, Chad, as surely as night follows day it 'll be a failure." The blue eyes all but flashed. "Moreover, it 's a hideous injustice to the girl."

Sidwell stiffened involuntarily.

"Your prediction sounds a bit strong from one who is himself a benedict," he returned coldly. "Upon what, if you please, do you base your opinion?"

Hough fidgeted in his chair.

"You want me to be frank, brutally frank, once more?"

"Anything you wish. I 'd like to know why you spoke as you did."

"The reason, then, is this. You two would no more mix than oil and water."

Sidwell's face did not change. "You and Elise seem to jog along fairly well together," he observed.

Hough scowled as before. "Yes, but there 's no pos-

sible similarity between the cases. You and I are no more alike than a dog and a rabbit. To come down to the direct issue, you 're city bred, and Miss Baker has been reared in the country. She — "

Sidwell held up his hand deprecatingly. "To return to the illustration, Elise was originally from the country."

" And to repeat once more," exclaimed Hough, " there 's again no similarity. Elise and I have been married eight years. We met at college, and grew together normally. We were both young and adaptable. Besides, at the risk of being tedious, I reiterate that you and I are totally unlike. I 'm only partially urban ; you are completely so — to your very finger-tips. I 'm half savage, more than half. I like to be out in the country, among the mountains, upon the lakes. I like to hunt and fish, and dawdle away time ; you care for none of these things. I can make money because I inherited capital, and it almost makes itself ; but it 's not with me a definite ambition. I have no positive object in life, unless it is to make the little woman happy. You have. Your work absorbs the best of you. You have n't much left for friendships, even mild ones like ours. I 've been with you for a good many years, old man, and I know what I 'm talking about. You are old, older than your years, and you 're not young even in them. You 're selfish — pardon me, but it 's true — abominably selfish. Your character, your point of view, your habits — are all formed. You 'll never change ; you would n't if you could. Miss Baker is hardly more than a child. I know her — I 've made it a point

to know her since I saw you were interested in her. Everything in the world rings genuine to her as yet. She has n't learned to detect the counterfeit, and when the knowledge does come it will hurt her cruelly. She 'll want to get back to nature as surely as a child with a bruised finger wants its mother ; and you can't go with her. Most of all, Chad, she 's a woman. You don't know what that means — no unmarried man does know. Even we married ones never grasp the subtleties of woman-nature completely. I 've been studying one for eight years, and at times she escapes me. But one thing I have learned ; they demand that they shall be first in the life of the man they love. Florence Baker will demand this, and after the first novelty has worn off you won't satisfy her. I repeat once more, you 're too selfish for that. As sure as anything can be, Chad Sidwell, if you marry that girl it will end in disaster — in divorce, or something worse."

The voice ceased, and the place was of a sudden very quiet. Sidwell tapped on his thin drinking-glass with his finger-nail. His companion had never seen him nervous before. At last he looked up unshiftingly. "You 've given me a pretty vivid portrait of myself, of what I 'm good for, and what not," he said. "Would you like me to return the compliment ? "

Again Hough wondered what was coming. "Yes, I suppose so," he answered hesitatingly.

"You 've often remarked," said Sidwell, slowly, "that you knew of no work for which you were especially adapted. I think I could fit you out exactly to your

liking. Just get a position as guard to a lake of brimstone in the infernal regions."

Hough laughed, but Sidwell did not. "I fancy," he continued monotonously, "I see you now, a long needle-pointed spear in your hands, jabbing back the poor sinners who tried to crawl out."

"Chad!" interrupted the other reproachfully. "Chad!" But Sidwell did not stop.

"You 'd stand well back, so that the sulphur fumes would n't irritate your own nostrils, and so that when the bubbles from the boiling broke they would n't spatter you, and with the finest kind of intuition and the most delicate aim you 'd select the tenderest place in your intended victim's anatomy for your spear-point." He smiled ironically at the picture. "Gad! you 'd be a howling success there, old man!"

An expression of genuine contrition formed on Hough's jolly face. "I 'm dead sorry I hurt you, Chad," he said, "but you asked me to be frank."

"You certainly were frank," rejoined the other bluntly.

"What I said, though, was true," reiterated Hough.

Sidwell leaned a bit forward, his face, handsome in spite of its shadings of discontent, clear in the light.

"Perhaps," he went on. "The trouble with you is that you don't give me credit for a single redeeming virtue. No one in this world is wholly good or wholly bad. You forget that I 'm a human being, with natural feelings and desires. You make me out a sort of machine, cunningly constructed for a certain work. You limit my life to that work alone. A human being, even one born

of the artificial state called civilization, is n't a contrivance like a typewriter which you can make work and then shut up in a box until it is wanted again. There are certain emotions, certain wants, you can't suppress by logic. Even a dog, if you imprison him alone, will go mad in time. I 'm a living man, with red blood instead of ink in my veins, not an abstract mathematical problem. I 've had my full share of work and unhappiness. You 'll have to give me a better reason for remaining without the gate of the promised land than you 've yet done."

Hough looked at the speaker impotently. "You misunderstood me, Chad, if you thought I was trying to keep you from your due, or from anything which would really make for your happiness. I was simply trying to prevent something I feel morally certain you 'll regret. Because one is n't entirely happy is no adequate reason why he should make himself more unhappy. I can't say any more than I 've already said ; there's nothing more to say. My best reason for disapproving your contemplated action I gave you first, and you 've not considered it at all. It 's the injustice you do to a girl who does n't realize what she is doing. With your disposition, Chad, you 'd take away from her something which neither God nor man can ever give her back — her trust in life."

Sidwell's long fingers restlessly twirled the glass before him. The remainder of the untouched beer was now as so much stagnant water.

"If I don't undeceive her someone else will," he said.

"It 's inevitable. She 'll have to adjust herself to things as they are, as we all have to do."

Hough made a motion of deprecation.

"Miss Baker is no longer a child," continued Sidwell. "If you 've studied her as you say you 've done, you 've discovered that she has very definite ideas of her own. It 's true that I haven't known her long, but she has had an opportunity to know me well such as no one else has ever had, not even you. No one can say that she is leaping in the dark. Time and time again, at every opportunity, I have stripped my very soul bare for her observation. The thing has not been easy for me; indeed, I know of nothing I could have done that would have been more difficult. Though the present instance seems to give the statement the lie, I am not easily confidential, my friend. I have had a definite object in doing as I have done with Miss Baker. I am trying, as I never tried before in my life, to get in touch with her — as I 'll never try again, no matter how the effort results, to get in touch with a person. She knows the good and bad of me from A to Z. She knows the life I lead, the kind of people who make up that life, their aims, their amusements, their standards, social and moral, as thoroughly as I can make her know them. I have taken her everywhere, shown her every phase of my surroundings. For once in my life at least, Hough, I have been absolutely what I am, — absolutely frank. Farther than that I cannot go. I am not my brother's keeper. She is an individual in a world of individuals; a free agent, mental, moral, and physical. The decision of her future actions, the choice

she makes of her future life, must of necessity rest with her. For some reason I cannot point to a definite explanation and say this or that is why she is attractive to me. She seems to offer the solution of a want I feel. No system of logic can convince me that, after having been honest as I have been with her, if she of her own free will consents to be my wife, I have not a moral right to make her so."

Again Hough made a deprecatory motion. "It is useless to argue with you," he said helplessly, "and I won't attempt it. If I were to try, I could n't make you realize that the very methods of frankness you have used to make Miss Baker know you intimately have defeated their own purpose, and have unconsciously made you an integral part of her life. I said before that when you wish you 're irresistibly fascinating with women. All that you have said only exemplifies my statement. It does not, however, in the least change the homely fact that oil and water won't permanently mix. You can shake them together, and for a time it may seem that they are one; but eventually they 'll separate, and stay separate. As I said before, though, I do not expect you to realize this, or to apply it. I can't make what I know by intuition sufficiently convincing. I wish I could. I feel that somehow this has been my opportunity and I have failed."

For the instant Sidwell was roused out of himself. He looked at his companion with appreciation. "At least you can have the consolation of knowing you have honestly tried," he said earnestly.

Hough returned the look with equal steadiness. "But nevertheless I have failed."

Sidwell put on his hat, its broad brim shading his eyes and concealing their expression.

"Providence willing," he said finally, "I shall ask Miss Baker to be my wife."

CHAPTER XXI

LOVE IN CONFLICT

THE habits of a lifetime are not changed in a day. Ben Blair was accustomed to rising early, and he was astir next morning long before the city proper was thoroughly awake. In the hotel where he was stopping, the night clerk looked his surprise as he nodded a stereotyped "Good-morning." The lobby was in confusion, undergoing its early morning scrubbing, and the guest sought the street. The sun was just risen, but the air was already sultry, casting oppression and languor over every detail of the scene. The bare brick and stone fronts of the buildings, the brown cobblestones of the pavements, the dull gray of the sidewalks, all looked inhospitable and forbidding. Few vehicles were yet in motion — distributors of necessities, of ice, of milk, of vegetables — and they partook of the general indolence. The horses' ears swayed listlessly, or were set back in dogged endurance. The drivers lounged stolidly in their seats. Even the few passengers on the monotonously droning cars but added to the impression of tacit conformity to the inevitable. Poorly dressed as a rule, tired looking, they gazed at their feet or glanced out upon the street with absent indifference. It was all depressing.

Ben, normal, vigorous, country bred, shook himself and walked on. He was as susceptible as a child to surrounding influences, and to those now about him he was distinctly antagonistic. Life, as a whole, particularly work, the thing that does most to fill life, he had found good. That others should so obviously find it different grated upon him. He wanted to get away from their presence; and making inquiry of the first policeman he met, he sought the nearest park.

All his life he had heard of the beauty of the New York parks. The few people he knew who had visited them emphasized this beauty above all other features. Perhaps in consequence he was expecting the impossible. At least, he was disappointed. Here was nature, to be sure, but nature imprisoned under the thumb of man. The visitor had a healthy desire to roll on the grass, to turn himself loose, to stretch every joint and muscle; yet signs on each side gave warning to "keep off." The trees, it must be admitted, were beautiful and natural, — they could not live and be otherwise; but somehow they had the air of not being there of their own free-will.

Ben chose a bench and sat down. A listlessness was upon him that the ozone of the prairies had never let him feel. He felt cramped for room, as though, should he draw as full a breath as he wished, it would exhaust the supply. A big freshly-shaven policeman strolled by, eying him suspiciously. It gave the young man the impression of being a prisoner out on good behavior; and in an indefinite way it almost insulted his self-respect. For the lack of something better to do he watched the minion of the

law as he pursued his beat. Not Ben Blair alone, but every person the officer passed, went through this challenging inspection. The countryman had been too much preoccupied to notice that he had companions; but now that his interest was aroused, he began inspecting the occupants of the other benches. The person nearest him was a little old man in a crumpled linen suit. Most of the time his nose was close to his morning paper; but now and then he raised his face and looked away with an absent expression in his faded near-sighted eyes. Was he enjoying his present life? Ben would have taken his oath to the contrary. Again there flashed over him the impression of a prison with this fellow-being in confinement. There was indescribable pathos in that dull retrospective gaze, and Ben looked away. In the land from which he came there could not be found such an example of hopeless and useless age. There the aged had occupation, — the care of their children's children, a garden, an interest in crops and growing things, a fame as prophets of weather, — but such apathy as this, never.

A bit farther away was another type, also a man, badly dressed and unshaven. His battered felt hat was drawn low over the upper half of his face, and he was stretched flat upon the narrow bench. He was far too long for his bed, and to accommodate his superfluous length his knees were bent up like a jack-knife. Carrying with them the baggy trousers, — he wore no underclothes, — they left a hairy expanse between their ends and the yellow, rusty shoes. His chest rose and fell in the motion of sleep.

Ben Blair had seen many a human derelict on the

frontier; the country was full of them, — adventurers, searchers after lost health — popularly denominated "one-lungers" — soldiers of fortune; but he had never known such a class as this man represented, — useless cumberers of the earth, wanderers by day, sleepers on the benches of public parks by night. Had he been a student of sociology he might have found a certain morbid interest in the spectacle; but it was merely depressing to him; it destroyed what pleasure he might otherwise have taken in the place. This man was but a step beneath those dull toilers he had seen on the cars. They had not yet given up the struggle against the inevitable, or were too stolid to rebel; while he —

Ben sprang to his feet and began retracing his steps. People bred in the city might be callous to the miseries of their fellows; those provided with plenty might be content to live their lives side by side with such hopeless poverty, might even apply to their own profit the necessities of others; but his was the hospitality and consideration of the frontier, the democracy that shares its last loaf with its fellow no matter who he may be, and shares it without question. The heartless selfishness of the conditions he was observing almost made his blood boil. He felt that he was amid an alien people: their standards were not as his standards, their lives were not of his life, and he wanted to hurry through with his affairs and get away. He returned to the hotel.

Breakfast was ready by this time, and after some exploration he succeeded in finding the dining-room. The head-waiter showed him to a seat and held his chair obse-

quiously. Another, a negro of uncertain age, fairly exuding dignity and impassive as a sphinx, poured water over the ice in his glass with a practised hand, produced the menu, and waited for his order. Without intending it, the countryman had selected a rather fashionable place, and the bill of fare was unintelligible as Sanskrit to him. He looked at it helplessly. A man across the table, observing his predicament, smiled involuntarily. Ben caught the expression, looked at its bearer meaningly, looked until it vanished, and until a faint red, obviously a stranger to that face, took its place. By a sudden inspiration Blair's hand went to his pocket and returned with a silver coin.

"Bring me what a healthy man usually eats at this time of day, and plenty of it," he said. He glanced absently, blandly past his companion.

The gentleman of color looked at the speaker as though he were a strange animal in a "zoo."

"Yes, sah," he said.

While he was waiting, Ben looked around him with interest. The room was big, high, massive of pillars and of beams. Every detail had been carefully arranged. The heavy oak tables, the spotless linen, the sparkling silver and glassware appealed to the sense of luxury. The coolness of the place, due to unseen ventilating fans which he heard faintly droning somewhere in the ceiling, and increased by the tile floor and the skilfully adjusted shades, was delightful. The few other people present were as immaculate as bath, laundry, tailor, and modiste could make them. From one group at which Ben looked came the suppressed sound of a woman's laugh; from another,

a man's voice, well modulated, illustrated a point with a story. At a small table in an alcove sat four young men, and notwithstanding the fact that for them it was yet very early in the day, the pop of a champagne cork was heard, and soon repeated. Blair, fresh from a glimpse of the outer and under world, observed it all, and drew comparisons. Again he saw the huddled figure of the tramp on the bench; and again he heard the careless music of the woman's laugh. He saw the dull animal stare of workers on their way to uncongenial toil; the hands still unsteady from yesterday's excesses lifting to dry lips the wine that would make them still more unsteady on the morrow. Could these contrasts be forever continued? he wondered. Would they be permitted to exist indefinitely side by side? Again, problem more difficult, could it be possible that the condition in which they existed was life? He could not believe it. His nature rebelled at the thought. No; life was not an artificial formula like this. It was broad and free and natural, as the prairies, his prairies, were natural and free. This other condition was a delirium, a momentary oblivion, of which the four young men in the alcove were a symbol. Transient pleasure, the life might mean; but the reverse, the inevitable reaction as from all intoxication, that —

Finishing his breakfast, Ben lit a cigar and sauntered out to the street. He had intended spending the morning seeing the town; but for the present he felt he had had enough — all he could mentally digest. Without at first any definite destination, in mere excess of healthy animal activity, he began to walk; but his principal object in

coming to the city, the object he made no effort to conceal, acted upon him like a lodestone, and almost ere he was aware he was well out in the residence portion of the city and headed directly for the Baker home. He was unaware that morning was not the fashionable time to call upon a lady. To him the fact of inclination and of presence in the vicinity was sufficient justification; and mounting the well-remembered steps he rang the doorbell stoutly. A prim maid in cap and diminutive apron, a recent addition to the household, answered his ring.

"I 'd like to see Miss Baker, if you please," said Ben.

The girl inspected the visitor critically. Beneath her surface decorum he had a suspicion that she was inclined to smile.

"I hardly think Miss Baker is up yet," she announced at last. "Will you leave your card?"

Ben looked at the sun, now well elevated in the sky, with an eye trained in the estimate of time. He drew mental conclusions silently.

"No," he said. "I will call later."

He did call later, — two hours later, — to receive from Scotty himself the intelligence that Florence was out but would soon return. Evidently the Englishman had been instructed; for, though he added an invitation to wait, it was only half-hearted, and being declined the matter was not pressed.

Ben returned to the hotel, ate his lunch, and considered the situation. A lesser man would have given up the fight and hidden his bruise; but Benjamin Blair was in no sense of the word a little man. He had come to town

with definite intent of seeing a certain girl alone, and see her alone he would. At four o'clock in the afternoon he again pressed the button on the Baker door-post, and again waited.

Again it was the maid who answered, and at the expected query she smiled outright. It seemed to her a capital joke that she was assisting in playing upon this man of unusual attire.

"Miss Baker is engaged," she announced, with the glibness of previous preparation.

To her surprise the visitor did not depart. Instead, he gave her a look which sent her mirth glimmering.

"Very well," he said. The door leading into the vestibule and from thence into the library was open, and without form of invitation he entered. "Tell her, please, that I will wait until she is not engaged."

The girl hesitated. This particular exigency had not been anticipated.

"Shall I give her a name?" she suggested, with an attempt at formality.

Ben Blair did not turn. "Tell her what I said."

He chose a chair facing the entrance and sat down. Departing on her mission, he heard the maid open another door on the same floor. There was for a moment a murmur of feminine voices, one of which he recognized; then silence again, as the door closed.

A half-hour passed, lengthened into an hour, all but repeated itself, and still apparently Florence was engaged; and still the visitor sat on. No power short of fire or an earthquake could have moved him now. Every

fragment of the indomitable perseverance of his nature was aroused, and instead of discouraging him each minute as it passed only made his determination the stronger. He shifted his chair so that it faced the window and the street, crossed his legs comfortably, half closed his eyes, resting yet watchful, and meditatively observed the growing procession of homeward bound wage-earners in car and on foot.

Suddenly there was the rustle of a woman's skirts, and he was conscious that he was no longer alone. He turned as he saw who it was, sprang to his feet, and despite the intentional slight of the long wait, a smile flashed to his face. He started to advance, but stopped.

"You wished to see me, I understand," a voice said coldly, as the speaker halted just within the doorway.

Ben Blair straightened. The hot blood mounted to his brain, throbbing at his throat and temples. It was not easy for him to receive insult; but outwardly he gave no sign.

"I think I have demonstrated the fact you mention," he replied calmly.

Florence Baker clasped her hands together. "Yes, your persistency is admirable," she said.

Ben Blair caught the word. "Persistency," he remarked, "seems the only recourse when past friendship and common courtesy are ignored."

Florence made no reply, and going forward Ben placed a chair deferentially. "It seems necessary for me to reverse the position of host and guest," he said. "Won't you be seated?"

The girl did not stir.

"I hardly think it necessary," she answered.

"Florence," Ben Blair's great chin lifted meaningly, "I will not be offended whatever you may do. I have something I wish to say to you. Please sit down."

The girl hesitated, and almost against her will looked the man fairly in the eyes, while her own blazed. Once more she felt his dominance controlling her, felt as she did when, in what seemed the very long ago, he had spread his blanket for her upon the prairie earth.

She sat down.

Ben drew up another chair and sat facing her. "Why," he was leaning a bit forward, his elbow on his knee, "why, Florence Baker, have you done everything in your power to prevent my seeing you? What have I done of late, what have I ever done, to deserve this treatment from you?"

The girl evaded his eyes. "It is not usually considered necessary for a lady to give her reasons for not wishing to see a gentleman," she parried. The handkerchief in her lap was being rolled unconsciously into a tight little ball. "The fact itself is sufficient."

Ben's free hand closed on the chair-arm with a mighty grip. "I beg your pardon," he said, "but I cannot agree with you. There's a certain amount of courtesy due between a woman and a man, as there is between man and man. It is my right to repeat the question."

The girl felt the cord drawing tighter, felt that in the end she would bend to his will.

"And should I refuse?" she asked.

"You won't refuse."

The girl's eyes returned to his. Even now she wondered that they did so, that try as she might she could not deny him. His dominance over her was well-nigh absolute. Yet she was not angry. An instinct that she had felt before possessed her; the longing of the weaker for the stronger — the impulse to give him what he wished. Her whole womanhood went out to him, with an entire confidence that she would never give to another human being. Naturally, he was her mate; naturally, — but she was not natural. She hesitated as she had done once before, a multitude of conflicting desires and ambitions seething in her brain. If she could but eliminate the artificial in her nature, the desire for the empty things of the world, then — But she could not yet give them up, and he could never be made to care for them with her. She was nearer now to giving them up, to giving up everything for his sake, than when she had sat alone with him out on the prairie. She realized this with an added complexity of emotion; but even yet, even yet —

A minute passed in silence, a minute of which the girl was unconscious. It was Ben Blair's voice repeating his first question that recalled her. This time she did not hesitate.

"I think you know the reason as well as I do. If we were mere friends or acquaintances I would be only too glad to see you; but we are not, and never can be merely friends. We have got to be either more or less." The voice, brave so far, dropped. A mist came over the brown eyes. "And we can't be more," she added.

The man's grip on the chair-arm loosened. He bent his face farther forward. "Miss Baker," he exclaimed. "Florence!"

Interrupting, almost imploring, the girl drew back. "Don't! Please don't!" she pleaded; then, as she saw the futility of words, with the old girlish motion her face dropped into her hands. "Oh, I knew it would mean this if I saw you!" she wailed. "You see for yourself we cannot be mere friends!"

The man did not stir, but his eyes changed color and seemed to grow darker. "No," he said, "we cannot be mere friends; I care for you too much for that. And I cannot be silent when I came away off here to see you. I would never respect myself again if I were. You can do what you please, say what you please, and I 'll not resent it — because it is you. I will love you as long as I live. I am not ashamed of this, because it is you I love, Florence Baker." He paused, looking tenderly at the girl's bowed head.

"Florence," he went on gently, "you don't know what you are to me, or what your having left me means. I often go over to your old ranch of a night and sit there alone, thinking of you, dreaming of you. Sometimes it is all so vivid that I almost feel that you are near, and before I know it I speak your name. Then I realize you are not there, and I feel so lonely that I wish I were dead. I think of to-morrow, and the next day, and the next — the thousands of days that I 'll have to live through without you — and I wonder how I am going to do it."

The girl's face sank deeper into her hands. A muffled sob escaped her. "Please don't say any more!" she pleaded. "Please don't! I can't stand it!"

But the man only looked at her steadily.

"I must finish," he said. "I may never have a chance to say this to you again, and something compels me to tell you of myself, for you are my good angel. In many ways it is of necessity a rough life I lead, but you are always with me, and I am the better for it. I have n't drank a drop since I came to know that I loved you, and we ranchers are not accustomed to that, Florence. But I never will drink as long as I live; for I 'll think of you, and I could n't then if I would. Once you saved me from something worse than drink. There was a man who shot Mr. Rankin and before this, from almost the first thought I can remember, I had sworn that if I ever met him I would kill him. We did meet. I followed him day after day until at last I caught up with him, until he was down and my hands were upon his throat. But I did n't hurt him, Florence, after all; I thought of you just in time."

He was silent, and suddenly the place seemed as still as an empty church. The girl's sobs were almost hysterical. The man's mood changed; he reached over and touched her gently on the shoulder.

"Forgive me for hurting you, Florence," he said. "I —I could n't help telling you."

Involuntarily the girlish figure straightened.

"Forgive you!" A tear-stained face was looking into his. "Forgive you! I 'll never be able to forgive myself!

You are a million times too good for me, Ben Blair. Forgive you! I ought never to cease asking you to forgive me!"

"Florence!" pleaded the man. "Florence!"

But the girl, in her turn, went on. "I have felt all the while that certain things I saw here were unreal, that they were not what they seemed. I have prevaricated to you deliberately. I have n't really been here long, but it seems to me now that it 's been years. As you said I would, I 've looked beneath the surface and seen the sham. At first I would n't believe what I saw; but at last I could n't help believing it, and, oh, it hurt! I never expect to be so hurt again. I could n't be. One can only feel that way once in one's life." The small form trembled with the memory, and the listener made a motion as if to stop her; but she held him away.

"It is n't that I 'm any longer blind; I am acting now with my eyes wide open. It is something else that keeps me from you now, something that crept in while I was learning my lesson, something I can't tell you." Once more the girl could not control herself, and sobbing, trembling, she covered her face. "Ben, Ben," she wailed, "why did you ever let me come here? You could have kept me if you would — you can do — anything. I would have loved you — I did love you all the time; only, only —" She could say no more.

For a second the man did not understand; then like a flash came realization, and he was upon his feet pacing up and down the narrow room. To lose an object one cares for most is one thing; to have it filched by another is

something very different. He was elemental, this man from the plains, and in some phases very illogical. The ways of the higher civilization, where man loves many times, where he dines and wines in good fellowship with him who is the husband of a former love — these were not his ways. White anger was in his heart, not against the woman, but against that other man. His fingers itched to be at his throat, regardless of custom or law. Temporarily, the rights and wishes of the woman, the prize of contention, were forgotten. Two young bucks in the forest do not consider the feelings of the doe that is the reward of the victor in the contest when they meet; and Ben Blair was very like these wild things. Only by an effort of the will could he keep from going immediately to find that other man, — intuition made it unnecessary to ask his name. As it was, he wanted now to be away. The tiny room seemed all at once stifling. He wanted to be out of doors where the sun shone, out where he could think. He seized his hat, then suddenly remembered, paused to glance — and that instant was his undoing, and another man's — Clarence Sidwell's — salvation.

And Florence Baker, at whom he had glanced? She was not tearful or hysterical now. Instead, she was looking at him out of wide-open eyes. Well she knew this man, and knew the volcano she had aroused.

"You won't hurt him, Ben!" she said. "You won't hurt him! For my sake, say you won't!"

The devil lurking in the cowboy's blue eyes vanished, but the great jaw was still set. He reached out and caught the girl by the shoulder. "Florence Baker," he

said, "on your honor, is he worth it — is he worth the sacrifice you ask of me? Answer!"

But the girl did not answer, did not stir. "You won't hurt him!" she repeated. "Say you won't!"

A moment longer Ben Blair held her; then his hands dropped and he turned toward the vestibule.

"I don't know," he said. "I don't know."

CHAPTER XXII

TWO FRIENDS HAVE IT OUT

CLARENCE SIDWELL was alone in his down-town bachelor quarters; that is, alone save for an individual the club-man's friends termed his "Man Friday," an undersized and very black negro named Alexander Hamilton Brown, but answering to the contraction "Alec." Valet, man of all work, steward, Alec was as much a fixture about the place as the floor or the ceiling; and, like them, his presence, save as a convenience, was ignored.

The rooms themselves were on the eleventh floor of a down-town office-building, as near the roof as it had been possible for him to secure suitable quarters. For eight years Sidwell had made them his home when he was in town. The circle of his friends had commented, his mother and sisters (his father had been long dead) had protested, when, a much younger man, he first severed himself from the semi-colonial mansion which for three generations had borne the name of Sidwell; but as usual, he had had his own way.

"I want to work when I feel so inclined, when the mood is on me, whether it 's two o'clock of the afternoon or of the morning," he had explained; "and I can't do it without interruption here with you and your friends."

For the same reason he had chosen to live near the sky. There, high above the noise and confusion, he could observe and catch the influence of the activity which is in itself a powerful stimulant, without experiencing its unpleasantness. Essentially, the man was an æsthete. If he went to a race or a foot-ball game he wished to view it at a distance. To be close by, to mingle in the dust of action, to smell the sweat of conflict, to listen to the low-voiced imprecations of the defeated, detracted from his pleasure. He could not prevent these features — therefore he avoided them.

This particular evening he was doing nothing, which was very unusual for him. The necessity for society, or for activity, physical or mental, had long ago become as much a part of his nature as the desire for food. Dilettante musician as well as artist, when alone at this time of the evening he was generally at the upright piano in the corner. Even Alec noticed the unusual lack of occupation on this occasion, and exposed the key-board suggestively; but, observing the action, Sidwell only smiled.

"Think I ought to, Alec?" he queried.

The negro rolled his eyes. Despite his long service, he had never quite lost his awe of the man he attended.

"Sho, yo always do that, or something, sah," he said.

Sidwell smiled again; but it was not a pleasant smile. So this was the way of it! Even his servant had observed his habitual restlessness, and had doubtless commented upon it to his companions in the way servants have of passing judgment upon their employers. And if Alec had noticed this, then how much more probable it was that

others of Sidwell's numerous acquaintances had noticed it also! He winced at the thought. That this was his skeleton, and that he had endeavored to keep it hidden, Sidwell did not attempt to deny to himself. One of the reasons he had *not* given to his family for establishing these down-town quarters was this very one. Time and again, when he had felt the mood of protest strong upon him, he had come here and locked the doors to fight it out alone. But after all, it had been useless. The fact had been obvious, despite the trick; mayhap even more so on account of it. Like the Wandering Jew he was doomed, followed by a relentless curse.

He shook himself, and walking over to the sideboard poured out a glass of Cognac and drank it as though it were wine. Sidwell did not often drink spirits. Experience had taught him that to begin usually meant to end with regret the following day; but to-night, with his present mood upon him, the action was as instinctive as breathing. He moved back to his chair by the window.

The evening was hot, on the street depressingly so, but up here after the sun was set there was always a breeze, and it was cool and comfortable. The man looked out over the sooty, gravelled roofs of the surrounding lower buildings, and down on the street, congested with its flowing stream of cars, equipages, and pedestrians. Times without number he had viewed the currents and counter-currents of that scene, but never before had he so caught its vital spirit and meaning. Born of the elect,—reared and educated among them,— the supercilious superiority of his class was as much a part of him as his name. While

he realized that physically the high and the low were constructed on practically the same plan, he had been wont to consider them as on totally separate mental planes. That the clerk and the roustabout on ten dollars a week, breathing the same atmosphere,—seeing daily, hourly, minute by minute, from separate viewpoints, the same life,—that they should have in common the constant need of diversion had never before occurred to him. Multitudes of times, as a sociologist, or as a literary man in search of realism, he had visited the haunts of the under-man. Languidly, critically, as he would have observed at the "zoo" an animal with whose habits he was unacquainted, he had watched this rather curious under-man in his foolish, or worse than foolish, endeavor to find amusement or oblivion. He had often been interested, as by a clown at a circus; but more frequently the sight had merely inspired disgust, and he had returned to his own diversions, his own efforts to secure the same end, with an all but unconscious thankfulness that he was not such as that other. To-night, for the first time, and with a wonder we all feel when the obvious but long unseen suddenly becomes apparent, the primary fact of human brotherhood, irrespective of caste, came home to him. To-night and now he realized, diminutive in the distance as they were, that the swarm of figures that he had hitherto considered mere animals vain of display were impelled upon the street, compelled to keep moving, moving, without a pre-arranged destination, by the same spirit of unrest that had sent him to the buffet. At that moment he was probably nearer to his fellow-man than ever before in his life; but the truth

revealed made him the more unhappy. He had grown to consider his own unhappiness totally different and infinitely more acute than that of others; he had even taken a sort of morbid, paradoxical pleasure in considering it so; and now even this was taken from him. Not only had his own secret skeleton been visible when he believed it concealed, but all around him there suddenly sprang up a very cemetery of other skeletons, grinning at his blindness and discomfiture. His was not a nature to extract content from common discomfort, and but one palliative suggested itself,—the dull red decanter on the sideboard. Rising again and filling a glass, he returned, and stood for a moment full before the open casement of the window gazing down steadily.

How long he stood there he hardly knew. Once Alec's dark face peered into the room, and disappeared as suddenly. At last there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," invited Sidwell, without moving. The door opened and closed, and Winston Hough stood inside. The big man gave one glance at the surroundings, saw the empty glass, and backed away. "Pardon my intrusion," he said with his hand on the knob.

Sidwell turned. "Intrusion — nothing!" He placed the decanter with glasses and a box of cigars on a convenient table. "Come and have a drink with me," and the liquor flowed until both glasses were nearly full.

Hough hesitated in a reluctance that was not feigned. He felt that discretion was the better part of valor, and that it would be well to escape while he could, even at the price of discourtesy.

"Really," he said, "I only dropped in to say hello. I —"

"Nonsense!" interrupted Sidwell. "You must think I'm as innocent as a new-born lamb. Come over here and sit down."

Hough hesitated, but yielded.

Sidwell lifted his glass. "Here's to — whatever the trouble may be that brought you here. People don't visit me for pleasure, or unless they have nowhere else to go. Drink deep!"

They drank; and then Sidwell looking at Hough said, "Well, what is it this time? Going to reform again, or something of that kind, are you?"

Hough did not attempt evasion. He knew it would be useless. "No," he said; "to tell you the truth, I'm lonesome — beastly lonesome."

Sidwell smiled. "Ah, I thought so. But why, pray? Aren't you a married man with an ark of refuge always waiting?"

Hough made a grimace. "Yes, that's just the trouble. I'm too much married, too thoroughly domesticated."

The other looked blank. "I fail to understand. Certainly you and Elise have n't at last —"

"No, no; not that." Hough repelled the suggestion with a gesture as though it were a tangible object. "Elise left to-day to spend a month with her uncle up in northern Wisconsin, and I can't get out of town for a week. I feel as I fancy a small bird feels when it has fallen out of the nest while its mother is away. The bottom seems to have dropped out of town and left me stranded."

The host observed his guest humorously — a bit maliciously. "It is good for you, you complacent benedict," he remarked unsympathetically. "You can understand now the normal state of mind of bachelors. Perhaps after a few more days you 'll have been tortured enough to retract the argument you made to me about matrimony. I repeat, it 's poetic justice, and good for a man now and then to have a dose of his own medicine."

Hough smiled as at an oft-heard joke. "All right, old man, have it as you please; only let 's steer clear of a useless discussion of the subject to-night."

"With all my heart," said Sidwell. The decanter was once more in his hand. "Let 's drink to the very good health of Elise on her journey."

Hough hesitated. He had a feeling that there was an obscure desecration in the toast, but it was not tangible enough to resent. "To her very good health," he repeated in turn.

For a moment he looked steadily into the face of his companion, now a trifle flushed. Again an inward monitor warned him it were better to go; but the first flood of the liquor had reached his brain, and the temptation to remain was strong.

"By the way, how are you coming on with your own affair of the heart? Have you propounded the momentous question to the lady?"

Sidwell pulled forward the box of cigars and helped himself to one. "No," he returned with deliberation. "I have n't had a good opportunity. A gentleman from the West, where they wear their hair long and their coat-tails

short, has suddenly appeared like an obscuring cloud on the Baker sky. I have a suspicion that he has aspirations for the hand of the lady in question. Anyhow, he 's haunted the house like a ghost to-day. Mother Baker has for some reason taken a fancy to your humble servant, and over the 'phone she has kept me informed of the stranger's tribulations. He seems to be meeting with sufficient difficulties without my interposition, so out of the goodness of my heart I 've given him an open field. I hope you appreciate my consideration. I fear he 's not of a stripe to do so himself."

Hough lit his cigar. "Yes, it certainly was kind of you," he said. "Very kind."

With a sweep of his hand Sidwell brought the two glasses together with a click. "I think so. Kind enough to deserve commemoration by a taste of the elixir of life, don't you agree?" and the liquor flowed beneath a hand steady in the first stages of intoxication.

Hough pushed back his chair. "No," he protested. "I 've had enough."

"Enough!" The other laughed unmusically. "Enough! You haven't begun yet. Drink, and forget your loneliness, you benedict disconsolate!"

But again the big man shook his head. "No," he repeated. "I 've had enough, and so have you. We 'll be drunk, both of us, if we keep up this clip much longer."

The smile left the host's face. "Drunk!" he echoed. "Since when, pray, has that exalted state of the consciousness begun to inspire terror in you? Drunk! Winston Hough, you 're the last man I ever thought would fail to

prove game on an occasion like this! We're no nearer being babes than we were the last time we got together, unless the termination of life approximates the beginning. Drink!"

But still, this time in silence, Hough shook his head. From a partially open door leading into the adjoining room the negro's eyes peered out.

Sidwell shifted in his seat with exaggerated deliberation and leaned forward. His dark mobile face worked passionately, compellingly. "Winston Hough," he challenged, "do you wish to remain my friend?"

"I certainly do."

"Then you know what to do."

Deep silence fell upon the room. Not only the eyes but the whole of Alec's face appeared through the doorway. Hough could no more have resisted longer than he could have leaped from the open window. They drank together.

"Now," said Sidwell, "just to show that you mean it, we'll have another."

And soon the enemy that puerile man puts into his mouth to steal his brains was enthroned.

Sidwell sank into his chair, and lighting his cigar sent a great cloud of smoke curling up over his head. Hand and tongue were steady, unnaturally so, but the mood of irresponsible confidence was upon him.

"Since you've decided to remain my friend," he said, "I'm going to tell you something confidential, very confidential. You won't give it away?"

"Never!" Hough shook his head.

"On your honor?"

The big man crossed his hands over his heart in the manner of small boys.

Sidwell was satisfied. "All right, then. This is the last time you and I will ever get — this way together."

Hough looked as solemn as though at a funeral. "Why so?" he protested. "Are you angry with me yet?"

"No, it's not that. I've forgiven you."

"What is it, then?" Hough felt that he must know the reason of his lost position, and if in his power remove it.

"I'm going to quit drinking after to-night, for one thing," explained Sidwell. "It is n't adequate. But even if I did n't, I don't expect we'll ever be together again after a few days, after you go away."

The listener looked blank. Even with his muddled brains he had an intimation that there was more in the statement than there seemed.

"I don't see why," he said bewilderedly.

Again Sidwell leaned forward. Again his face grew passionate and magnetic.

"The reason why is this. I have had enough, and more than enough, of this life I've been living. Unless I can find an interest, an extenuation, I would rather be dead, a hundred times over. I've become a nightmare to myself, and I won't stand it. In a few days you'll have departed, and before you return I'll probably have gone too. Nothing but an intervention of Providence can prevent my marrying Florence Baker now. Life is n't a story-book or we who live it undiscerning clods. She knows I am going to ask her to marry me, and I know what her

answer will be. We 'll be away on our wedding-trip long before you and Elise return in the Fall." The speaker's voice was sober. Only the heightened color of his face betrayed him.

"I say I 'm through with this sort of thing," he repeated, "and I mean it. I 've tried everything on the face of the earth to find an interest — but one — and Florence Baker represents that one. I hope against hope that I 'll find what I 'm searching for there, but I am skeptical. I have been disappointed too many times to expect happiness now. This is my last trump, old man, and I 'm playing it deliberately and carefully. If it fails, Florence will probably return ; but before God, I never will ! I have thought it all out. I will leave her more money than she can ever spend — enough if she wishes to buy the elect of the elect. She is young, and she will soon forget — if it 's necessary. With me, my actions have largely ceased to be a matter of ethics. I am desperate, Hough, and a desperate man takes what presents itself."

But Hough was in no condition to appreciate the meaning of the selfish revelation of his friend's true character. Since he married his lapses had been infrequent, and already his surroundings were becoming a bit vague. His one ambition was to appear what he was not — sober ; and he straightened himself stiffly.

"I see," he said, "sorry to lose you, old pal, very sorry ; but what must be must be, I s'pose," and he drew himself together with a jerk.

Sidwell glanced at the speaker sarcastically, almost with

a shade of contempt. "I know you 're sorry, deucedly sorry," he mocked. "So sorry that you 'd probably like to drown your excess of emotion in the flowing bowl." Again the ironic glance swept the other's face. "Another smile would be good for you, anyway. You 're entirely too serious. Here you are!" and the decanter once more did service.

Hough picked up his glass and nodded with gravity. "Yes, I always was a sad devil." By successive movements the liquor approached his lips. "Lots of troubles and tribulations all my —"

The sentence was not completed; the Cognac remained untasted. At that moment there was a knock upon the door.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BACK-FIRE

WHEN Ben Blair left the Baker home he went back to his room at the hotel, closed and locked the door, and, throwing off coat and hat, stretched himself full-length upon the floor, gazing up at the ceiling but seeing nothing. It had been a hard fight for self-control there on the prairie the day Florence rejected him, but it was as nothing to the tumult that now raged in his brain. Then, despite his pain, hope had remained. Now hope was lost, and in its place stood a maddening might-have-been. Under the compulsion of his will, the white flood of anger had passed, but it only made more difficult the solution of the problem confronting him. Under the influence of passion the situation would have been a mere physical proposition; but with opportunity to think, another's wishes and another's rights — those of the woman he loved — challenged him at every turn.

At first it seemed that a removal of his physical presence, a going away never to return, was adequate solution of the difficulty; but he soon realized that it was not. Deeper than his own love was his desire for the happiness of the girl he had known from childhood. Had he been

certain that she would be happy with the man who had fascinated her, he could have conquered self, could have returned to his prairies, his cattle, his work, and have concealed his hurt. But it was impossible for him to believe she would be happy. Without volition on his part he had become an actor in this drama, this comedy, this tragedy, — whatever it might prove to be; and he felt that it would be an act of cowardice upon his part to leave before the play was ended. He was not in the least religious in the sense of creed and dogma. In all his life he had scarcely given a thought to religion. His knowledge of the Almighty by name had been largely confined to that of a word to conjure with in mastering an obstreperous bronco; but, in the broad sense of personal cleanliness and individual duty, he was religious to the core. He would not shirk a responsibility, and a responsibility faced him now.

Hour after hour he lay prone while his active brain suggested one course after another, all, upon consideration, proving inadequate. Gradually out of the chaos one fundamental fact became distinct in his mind. He must know more of this man Clarence Sidwell before he could leave the city, and this decision brought him to his feet. Under the circumstances, a strategist might have employed others to gather surreptitiously the information desired; but such was not the nature of Benjamin Blair. One thing he had learned in dealing with his fellows, which was that the most effective way to secure the thing one wished was to go direct to the man who had it to give. In this case Sidwell was the man. With a grim smile

Ben remembered the invitation and the address he had received the first night he was in town. He would avail himself of both.

Night had fallen long ere this; when Ben arose the room was in darkness, save for the reflected light which came through the heavily curtained windows from the street lamps. He turned on an electric bulb and made a hasty toilet. In doing so his eye fell upon the two big revolvers within the drawer of the dresser; and the same impulse that had caused him to bring them into this land of civilization made him thrust them into his hip pockets. It was more habit than anything else, just as a man with a dog friend feels vaguely uncomfortable unless his pet is with him. Blair had the vigorously recurring appetite of a healthy animal, and it suddenly occurred to him that he had not yet dined. Descending to the street, he sought a *café* and ate a hearty meal.

A half-hour later, the elevator boy of the Metropolitan Block, where Sidwell had his quarters, was surprised, on answering the indicator, to find a young man in an abnormally broad hat and flannel shirt awaiting him. The youth was of vivid imagination, and knowing that a Wild West troupe was performing in town, one glance at Ben's hat, his suspicions became certainty.

"Eleventh floor," he announced, when the passenger had told his destination; then as the car moved upward he gathered courage and looked the rancher fair in the eye.

"Say, Mister," he ventured, "give me a pass to the show, will you?"

For an instant Ben looked blank; then he understood,

and his hand sought his trousers' pocket. "Sorry," he explained, "but I don't happen to have any with me. Will this do instead?" and he produced a half-dollar.

The boy brought the car deftly to a stop within a half-inch of the level of the desired floor. "Thank you. Mr. Sidwell — straight ahead, and turn to the left down the short hall," he said obligingly.

Blair stepped out, saying, "Don't fail to be around to-morrow when I do my stunt."

With open-mouthed admiration the boy watched the frontiersman's long free stride — a movement that struck the floor with the springiness of a cat, very different from the flat-footed jar of pedestrians on paved streets.

"I won't!" he called after him. "I'd rather see 't than a dozen ball-games! I'll look for you, Mister!"

At the interrupting tap upon the door, Sidwell voiced a languid "Come in," and merely shifted in his seat; but his big companion, with the hospitality of inebriation, had returned his glass unsteadily to the table and arisen. He had taken a couple of uncertain steps, as if to open the door, when, in answer to the summons, Ben Blair stepped inside. Hough halted with a suddenness which all but cost him his equilibrium. The expansive smile upon his face vanished, and he stared as though the bottomless pit had opened at his feet. For a fraction of a minute not one of the three men spoke or stirred, but in that time the steady blue eyes of the countryman took in the details of the scene — the luxurious furnishings, the condition of the two men — with the rapidity and minuteness of a

sensitized plate. Ironic chance had chosen an unpropitious night for his call. Intoxication surrounding a bar, under the stimulus of numbers, and preceding or following some exciting event, he could understand, could, perhaps, condone; but this solitary dissipation, drunkenness for its own sake, was something new to him. The observing eyes fastened themselves upon the host's face.

"In response to your invitation," he said evenly, "I've called."

Sidwell roused himself. His face flushed. Despite the liquor in his brain, he felt the inauspicious chance of the meeting.

"Glad you did," he said, with an attempt at ease. "Deucedly glad. I don't know of anyone in the world I'd rather see. Just speaking of you, were n't we?" he said, appealing to Hough. "By the way, Mr. — er — Blair, shake hands with Mr. Hough, Mr. Winston Hough. Mighty good fellow, Hough, but a bit melancholy. Needs cheering up a bit now and then. Needed it badly to-night — almost cried for it, in fact"; and the speaker smiled convivially.

Hough extended his hand with elaborate formality. "Delighted to meet you," he managed to articulate.

"Thank you," returned the other shortly.

Sidwell meanwhile was bringing a third chair and glass. "Come over, gentlemen," he invited, "and we 'll celebrate this, the proudest moment of my life. You drink, of course, Mr. Blair?"

Ben did not stir. "Thank you, but I never drink," he said.

"What!" Sidwell smiled sceptically. "A cattle-man, and not refresh yourself with good liquor? You refute all the precedents! Come over and take something!"

Ben only looked at him steadily. "I repeat, I never drink," he said conclusively.

Sidwell sat down, and Hough followed his lead.

"All right, all right! Have a cigar, then. At least you smoke?"

"Yes," assented Blair, "I smoke — sometimes."

The host extended the box hospitably. "Help yourself. They 're good ones, I 'll answer for that. I import them myself."

Ben took a step forward, but his hands were still in his pockets. "Mr. Sidwell," he said, "we may as well save time and try to understand each other. In some ways I am a bit like an Indian. I never smoke except with a friend, and I am not sure you are a friend of mine. To be candid with you, I believe you are not."

Hough stirred in his chair, but Sidwell remained impassive save that the convivial smile vanished.

A quarter of a minute passed. Once the host took up his glass as if to drink, but put it down untasted. At last he indicated the vacant chair.

"Won't you be seated?" he invited.

Ben sat down.

"You say," continued Sidwell, "that I am not your friend. The statement and your actions carry the implication that of necessity, then, we must be enemies."

The speaker was sparring for time. His brain was not yet normal, but it was clearing rapidly. He saw this was

no ordinary man he had to deal with, no ordinary circumstance; and his plan of campaign was unevolved.

"I fail to see why," he continued.

"Do you?" said Ben, quietly.

Sidwell lit a cigar nonchalantly and smoked for a moment in silence.

"Yes," he reiterated. "I fail to see why. To have made you an enemy implies that I have done you an injury, and I recall no way in which I could have offended you."

Ben indicated Hough with a nod of his head. "Do you wish a third party to hear what we have to say?" he inquired.

Sidwell looked at the questioner narrowly. Deep in his heart he was thankful that they two were not alone. He did not like the look in the countryman's blue eyes.

"Mr. Hough," he said with dignity, "is a friend of mine. If either of you must leave the room, most assuredly it will not be he." His eyes returned to those of the visitor, held there with an effort. "By the bye," he challenged, "what is it we have to say, anyway? So far as I can see, there 's no point where we touch."

Ben returned the gaze steadily. "Absolutely none?" he asked.

"Absolutely none." Sidwell spoke with an air of finality.

The countryman leaned a bit forward and rested his elbow upon his knee, his chin upon his hand.

"Suppose I suggest a point then: Miss Florence Baker."

Sidwell stiffened with exaggerated dignity. "I never discuss my relations with a lady, even with a friend. I should be less apt to do so in speaking with a stranger."

The lids of Ben's eyes tightened just a shade. "Then I 'll have to ask you to make an exception to the rule," he said slowly.

"In that case," Sidwell responded quickly, "I 'll refuse."

For a moment silence fell. Through the open window came the ceaseless drone of the shifting multitude on the street below.

"Nevertheless, I insist," said Ben, calmly.

Sidwell's face flushed, although he was quite sober now. "And I must still refuse," he said, rising. "Moreover, I must request that you leave the room. You forget that you are in my home!"

Ben arose calmly and walked to the door through which he had entered. The key was in the lock, and turning it he put it in his pocket. Still without haste he returned to his seat.

"That this is your home, and that you were its dictator before I came and will be after I leave, I do not contest," he said; "but temporarily the place has changed hands. I do not think you were quite in earnest when you refused to talk with me."

For answer, Sidwell jerked a cord beside the table. A bell rang vigorously in the rear of the apartments, and the big negro hurried into the room.

"Alec," directed the master, "call a policeman at once! At once — do you hear?"

"Yes, sah," and the servant started to obey; but the visitor's eye caught his.

"Alec," said Ben, steadily, "don't do that! I'll be the first person to leave this room!"

Instantly Sidwell was on his feet, his face convulsed with passion. "Curse you!" he cried. "You'll pay for this! I'll teach you what it means to hold up a man in his own house!" He turned to his servant with a look that made the latter recoil. "I want you to understand that when I give an order I mean it. Go!"

Blair was likewise on his feet, his long body stretched to its full height, his blue eyes fastened upon the face of the panic-stricken darky.

"Alec," he repeated evenly, "you heard what I said." Without a motion save of his head he indicated a seat in the corner of the room. "Sit down!"

Sidwell took a step forward, his clenched fists raised menacingly.

"Blair! you — you —"

"Yes."

"You —"

"Certainly, I —"

That was all. It was not a lengthy conversation, or a brilliant one, but it was adequate. Face to face, the two men stood looking in each other's eyes, each taking his opponent's measure. Hough had also risen; he expected bloodshed; but not once did Blair stir as much as an eyelid, and after that first step Sidwell also halted. Beneath his supercilious caste dominance he was a physical coward, and at the supreme test he weakened. The flood of anger

passed as swiftly as it had come, leaving him impotent. He stood for a moment, and then the clenched fist dropped to his side.

For the first time, Ben Blair moved. Unemotionally as before, his nod indicated the chair in the corner.

"Sit over there as long as I stay, Alec," he directed; and the negro responded with the alacrity of a well-trained dog.

Ben turned to the big man. "And you, too, Hough. My business has nothing to do with you, but it may be well to have a witness. Be seated, please."

Hough obeyed in silence. Sober as Sidwell now, his mind grasped the situation, and in spite of himself he felt his sympathy going out to this masterful plainsman.

Ben Blair now turned to the host, and as he did so his wiry figure underwent a transformation that lived long in the spectators' minds. With his old characteristic motion, his hands went into his trousers' pockets, his chest expanded, his great chin lifted until, looking down, his eyes were half closed.

"You, Mr. Sidwell," he said, "can stand or sit, as you please; but one thing I warn you not to do — don't lie to me. We're in the home of lies just now, but it can't help you. Your face says you are used to having your own way, right or wrong. Now you'll know the reverse. So long as you speak the truth, I won't hurt you, no matter what you say. If you don't, and believe in God, you'd best make your peace with Him. Do you doubt that?"

One glance only Sidwell raised to the towering face,

and his eyes fell. Every trace of fight, of effrontery, had left him, and he dropped weakly into his chair.

"No, I don't doubt you," he said.

Ben likewise sat down, but his eyes were inexorable.

"First of all, then," he went on, "you will admit you were mistaken when you said there was no point where we touched?"

"Yes, I was mistaken."

"And you were not serious when you refused to talk with me?"

A spasm of repugnance shot over the host's dark face. He heard the labored breathing of the negro in the corner, and felt the eyes of his big friend upon him.

"Yes, I was not serious," he admitted slowly.

Ben's long legs crossed, his hands closed on the chair-arms.

"Very well, then," he said. "Tell me what there is between you and Miss Baker."

Sidwell lit a cigar, though the hand that held the match trembled.

"Everything, I hope," he said. "I intend marrying her."

The ranchman's face gave no sign at the confession.

"You have asked her, have you?"

"No. Your coming prevented. I should otherwise have done so to-day."

The long fingers on the chair-arms tightened until they grew white.

"You knew why I came to town, did you not?"

Sidwell hesitated.

"I had an intuition," he admitted reluctantly.

Again silence fell, and the subdued roar of the city came to their ears.

"You have not called at the Baker home to-day," continued Blair. "Was it consideration for me that kept you away?" The thin, weather-browned face grew, if possible, more clean-cut. "Remember to talk straight."

Sidwell took the cigar from his lips. An exultation he could not quite repress flooded him. His eyes met the other's fair.

"No," he said, "it was anything but consideration for you. I knew she was going to refuse you."

In the corner the negro's eyes widened. Even Hough held his breath; but not a muscle of Ben Blair's body stirred.

"You say you knew," he said evenly. "How did you know?"

Sidwell flicked the ash from his cigar steadily. He was regaining, if not his courage, at least some of his presence of mind. This seeming desperado from the West was a being upon whom reason was not altogether wasted.

"I knew because her mother told me — about all there was to tell, I guess — of your relations before Florence came here. I knew if she refused you then she would be more apt to do so now."

Still the figure in brown was that of a statue.

"She told you — what — you say?"

Sidwell shifted uncomfortably. He saw breakers ahead.

"The — main reason at least," he modified.

"Which was — " insistently.

Sidwell hesitated, his new-found confidence vanishing like the smoke from his cigar. But there was no escape.

"The reason, she said, was because you were — minus a pedigree."

The last words dropped like a bomb in the midst of the room. Ben Blair swiftly rose from his seat. The negro's eyes rolled around in search of some place of concealment. With a protesting movement Hough was on his feet.

"Gentlemen!" he implored. "Gentlemen!"

But the intervention was unnecessary. Ben Blair had settled back in his seat. Once more his hands were on the chair-arms.

"Do you," he insinuated gently, "consider the reason she gave an adequate one? Do you consider that it had any rightful place in the discussion?"

The question, seemingly simple, was hard to answer. An affirmative trembled on the city man's tongue. He realized it was his opportunity for a crushing rejoinder. But cold blue eyes were upon him and the meaning of their light was only too clear.

"I can understand the lady's point of view," he said evasively.

Ben Blair leaned forward, the great muscles of his jaw and temples tightening beneath the skin.

"I did not ask for the lady's point of view," he admonished, "I asked for your own."

Again Sidwell felt his opportunity, but physical cowardice intervened. No power on earth could have made him say "yes" when the other looked at him like that.

"No," he lied, "I do not see that it should make the slightest difference."

"On your honor, you swear you do not?"

Sidwell repeated the statement, and sealed it with his honor.

Ben Blair relaxed, and Hough mopped his brow with a sigh of relief. Even Sidwell felt the respite, but it was short-lived.

"I think," Ben resumed, "that what you've just said and sworn to gives the lie to your original statement that you have given me no cause for enmity. According to your own showing you are the one existing obstacle between Florence Baker and myself. Is it not so?"

Like a condemned criminal, Sidwell felt the noose tightening.

"I can't deny it," he admitted.

For some seconds Ben Blair looked at him with an expression almost menacing. When he again spoke the first trace of passion was in his voice.

"Such being the case, Clarence Sidwell," he went on, "caring for Florence Baker as I do, and knowing you as I do, why in God's name should I leave you, coward, in possession of the dearest thing to me in the world?" For an instant the voice paused, the protruding lower jaw advanced until it became a positive disfigurement. "Tell me why I should sacrifice my own happiness for yours. I have had enough of this word-play. Speak!"

In every human life there is at some time a supreme moment, a tragic climax of events; and Sidwell realized that for him this moment had arrived. Moreover, it

had found him helpless and unprepared. Artificial to the bone, he was fundamentally disqualified to meet such an emergency; for artifice or subterfuge would not serve him now. One hasty glance into that relentless face caused him to turn his own away. Long ago, in the West, he had once seen a rustler hung by a posse of ranchers. The inexorable expression he remembered on the surrounding faces was mirrored in Ben Blair's. His brain whirled; he could not think. His hand passed aimlessly over his face; he started to speak, but his voice failed him.

Ben Blair shifted forward in his seat. The long sinewy fingers gripped the chair like a panther ready to spring.

"I am listening," he admonished.

Sidwell felt the air of the room grow stifling. A big clock was ticking on the wall, and it seemed to him the second-beats were minutes apart. His downcast eyes just caught the shape of the hands opposite him, and in fancy he felt them already tightening upon his throat. Like a drowning man, scenes in his past life swarmed through his brain. He saw his mother, his sisters, at home in the old family mansion; his friends at the club, chatting, laughing, drinking, smoking. In an impersonal sort of way he wondered how they would feel, what they would say, when they heard. On the vision swept. It was Florence Baker he saw now — Florence, all in fleecy white; the girl and himself were on the broad veranda of the Baker home. They were not alone. Another figure — yes, this same menacing figure now so near — was on the walk below them, his broad-brimmed hat in his hand, but

leaving. Florence was speaking; a smile was upon her lips.

Like a flash of lightning the images of fancy passed, the present returned. At last came the solution once before suggested, — the back-fire! Sidwell straightened, every nerve in his body tense. He spoke — and scarcely recognized his own voice.

"There is a reason," he said, "a very adequate reason; one which concerns another more than it does us." With a supreme effort of will the man met the blue eyes of his opponent squarely. "It is because Florence Baker loves me and does n't love you. Because she would never forgive you, never, if you did — what you think of doing now."

For an instant the listening figure remained tense, and it seemed to Sidwell that his own pulse ceased beating; then the long sinewy body collapsed as under a physical blow.

"God!" said a low voice. "I forgot!"

Not one of the three spectators stirred or spoke. Like sheep, they awaited the lead of their master.

And it came full soon. Stiffly, clumsily, still in silence, Ben Blair arose. His face was drawn and old, his step was slow and halting. Like one walking in his sleep, he made his way to the door, took the key from his pocket, and turned the lock. Not once did he speak or glance back. The door closed softly, and he was gone.

Behind him for a second there was silence, inactive incredulity as at a miracle performed; then, in a blaze of long repressed fury, Sidwell stood beside the table. Not

pausing for a glass, he raised the red decanter to his lips and drank, drank, as though the liquor were water.

"Curse him! I'll marry that girl now if for no other reason than to get even with him. If it's the last act of my life, I swear I'll marry her!"

CHAPTER XXIV

THE UPPER AND THE NETHER MILLSTONES

OUT on the street once more, Ben Blair looked about him as one awakening from a dream. From the darkened arch of a convenient doorway he watched the endless passing throng with a dull sort of wonder. He was surprised that the city should be awake at that late hour; and stepping out into the light he held up his watch. The hands indicated a few minutes past ten, and in surprise he carried the timepiece to his ear. Yes, it was running, and must be correct. He had seemed to be up there on the eleventh floor for hours; but as a matter of fact it had been only minutes. Practically, the whole night was yet before him.

Slowly, in a listless way, he started to walk back to his hotel. Instead of the night becoming cooler it had grown sultrier, and in places the walk was fairly packed with human beings. More than once he had to turn out of his way to pass the chattering groups. In so doing he was often conscious that the flow of small talk suddenly ceased, and that, nudging each other, the chatterers pointed his way. At first he looked about to see what had attracted them, but he very soon realized that he himself was the object of attention. Even here, cosmopolitan as were the

surroundings, he was a marked man, was recognized as a person from a wholly different life; and his feeling of isolation deepened. He moved on more swiftly.

The sidewalk in front of his hotel was fringed with a row of chairs, in which sat guests in various stages of negligee costume. Nearly every man was smoking, and the effect in the semi-darkness was like that of footlights turned low. Steps and lobby were likewise crowded; but Ben made his way straight to his room. One idea now possessed him. His business was finished, and he wanted to be away. Turning on a light, he found a railroad guide and ran down the columns of figures. There was no late night train going West; he must wait until morning. Extinguishing the light, he drew a chair to the open window and lit a cigar.

With physical inactivity, consciousness of his surroundings forced themselves on his attention. Subdued, pulsating, penetrating, the murmur of the great hotel came to his ears; the drone of indistinguishable voices, the pattering footsteps of bell-boys and *habitués*, the purr of the elevator as it moved from floor to floor, the click of the gate as it stopped at his own level, the renewed monotone as it passed by.

Continuous, untiring, the sounds suggested the unthinking vitality of a steam-engine or of a dynamo in a power-house. A mechanic by nature, as a school-boy Ben had often induced Scotty to take him to the electric light station, where he had watched the great machines with a fascination bordering on awe, until fairly dragged away by the prosaic Englishman. This feeling of his childhood recurred

to him now with irresistible force. The throb of the motor of human life was pulsating in his ears; but added to it was something more, something elusive, intangible, but all-powerful. The moment he had arrived within the city limits he had felt the first trace of its presence. As he approached the centre of congestion it had deepened, had become more and more a guiding influence. Since then, by day or by night, wherever he went, augmenting or diminishing, it was constantly with him. And it was not with him alone. Every human being with whom he came in contact was likewise consciously or unconsciously under the spell. The crowds he had passed on the streets were unthinkingly answering its guidance. The trolley cars echoed its voice. It was the spirit of unrest — a thing ubiquitous and all-penetrating as the air that filled their lungs — a subtle stimulant that they took in with every breath.

Ben Blair arose and put on his hat. He had been sitting only a few minutes, but he felt that he could not longer bear the inactivity. To do so meant to think; and thought was the thing that to-night he was attempting to avoid. Moreover, for one of the few times in his life he could remember he was desperately lonely. It seemed to him that nowhere within a thousand miles was another of his own kind. Instinctively he craved relief; and that alleviation could come in but one way, — through physical activity. Again he sought the street.

To some persons a great relief from loneliness is found in mingling with a crowd, even though it be of strangers; but Ben was not like these. His desire was to be away

as far as possible from the maddening drone. Boarding a street car, he rode out into the residence section, clear to the end of the loop; then, alighting, he started to walk back. A full moon had arisen, and outside the shadow-blots of trees and buildings the earth was all alight. The asphalt of the pavements and the cement of the walks glistened white under its rays. Loth to sacrifice the comparative out-of-door coolness for the heat within, practically every house had its group on the doorsteps, or scattered upon the narrow lawns. Accustomed to magnificent distances, to boundless miles of surrounding country, to privacy absolute, Ben watched this scene with a return of the old wonder, — the old feeling of isolation, of separateness. Side by side, young men and women, obviously lovers, kept their places, indifferent to his observation. Other couples, still more careless, sat with circling arms and faces close together, returning his gaze impassively. Nothing, apparently, in the complex gamut of human nature was sacred to these folk. To the solitary spectator, the revelation was more depressing than even the down-town unrest; and he hurried on.

Further ahead he came to the homes of the wealthy, — great piles of stone and brick, that seemed more like hotels than residences. The forbidding darkness of many of the houses testified that their owners were out of town, at the seaside or among the mountains; but others were brilliantly lighted from basement to roof. Before one a long line of carriages was drawn up. Stiffly liveried footmen, impassive as automatons, waited the erratic pleasure

of their masters. A little group of spectators was already gathered, and Ben likewise paused, observing the spectacle curiously.

A social event of some sort was in progress. From some concealed place came the music of a string orchestra. Every window of the great pile was open for ventilation, and Ben could hear and see almost as plainly as the guests themselves. For a time, deep, insistent, throbbing in measured beat, came the drone of the 'cello, the wail of the clarionet, and, faintly audible beneath, the rustle of moving feet. Then the music ceased; and a few seconds later a throng of heated dancers swarmed through the open doorway to the surrounding veranda, and simultaneously a chatter broke forth. Fans, like gigantic butterfly wings, vibrated to and fro. Skilful waiters, in black and white, glanced in and out. Laughter, thoughtless and care-free, mingled in the general scene.

The music still, Ben Blair was about to move on, when suddenly a man and a girl in the shadow of a window on the second floor caught and held his attention. As far as he could see, they were alone. Evidently one or the other of them knew the house intimately, and had deliberately sought the place. From the veranda beneath, the flow of talk continued uninterruptedly; but they gave it no attention. The spectator could distinctly see the man as he leaned back in the light and spoke earnestly. At times he gesticulated with rapid passionate motions, such as one unconsciously uses when deeply absorbed. Now and again, with the bodily motions that we have learned to connect

with the French, his shoulders were shrugged expressively. He was obviously talking against time; for his every motion showed intense concentration. No spectator could have mistaken the nature of his speech. Passion supreme, abandon absolute, were here personified. As he spoke, he gradually leaned farther forward toward the woman who listened. His face was no longer in the light. Suddenly, at first low, as though coming from a distance, increasing gradually until it throbbed into the steady beat of a waltz, the music recommenced. It was the signal for action and for throwing off restraint. The man leaned forward; his arm stretched out and closed about the figure of the woman. His face pressed forward to meet hers, again and again.

Not Ben alone, but a half-dozen other spectators had watched the scene. An overdressed girl among the number tittered at the sight.

But Ben scarcely noticed. With the strength of insulted womanhood, the girl had broken free, and now stood up full in the light. One look she gave to the man, a look which should have withered him with its scorn; then, gathering her skirts, she almost ran from the room.

Only a few seconds had the girl's face been clear of the shadow; yet it had been long enough to permit recognition, and instantly liquid fire flowed in the veins of Benjamin Blair. His breath came quick and short as that of a runner passing under the wire, and his great jaw set. The woman he had seen was Florence Baker.

With one motion he was upon the terrace leading

toward the house. Another second, and he would have been well upon his way, when a hand grasped him from behind and drew him back. With a half-articulated imprecation Ben turned — and stood fronting Scotty Baker. The Englishman's face was very white. Behind the compound lenses his eyes glowed in a way Ben had not thought possible; but his voice was steady when he spoke.

"I saw too, Ben," he said, "and I understand. I know what you want to do, and God knows I want to do the same thing myself; but it would do no good; it would only make the matter worse." He looked at the younger man fixedly, almost imploringly. His voice sank. "As you care for Florence, Ben, go away. Don't make a scene that will do only harm. Leave her with me. I came to take her home, and I 'll do so at once." The speaker paused, and his hand reached out and grasped the other's with a grip unmistakable. "I appreciate your motive, my boy, and I honor it. I know how you feel; and whatever I may have been in the past, from this time on I am your friend. I am your friend now, when I ask you to go," and he fairly forced his companion away.

Once outside the crowd, Ben halted. He gave the Englishman one long look; his lips opened as if to speak; then, without a word, he moved away.

There was no listlessness about him now. He was throbbing with repressed energy, like a great engine with steam up. His feet tapped with the regularity of clock-ticks over mile after mile of the city walks. He longed for physical weariness, for sleep; but the day, with its manifold mental exaltations and depressions, prevented.

It seemed to him that he could never sleep again, could never again be weary. He could only walk on and on.

Down town again, he found the crowds smaller and the border of chairs in front of his hotel largely empty. A few cigars still burned in the half-light, but they were the last flicker of a conflagration now all but extinguished. The restless throb of the human dynamo was lower and more subdued. The street cars were practically empty. Instead of a constant stream of vehicles, an occasional cab clattered past. The city was preparing for its brief hours of fitful rest.

Straight on Ben walked, between the towering office buildings, beside the now darkened department-store hives, past the giant wholesale establishments and warehouses; until, quite unintentionally on his part, and almost before he realized it, he found himself in another world, another city, as distinct as though it were no part of the cosmopolitan whole. Again he came upon throbbing life; but of quite another type. Once more he met people in abundance, noisy, chattering human beings; but more frequently than his own he now heard foreign tongues that he did not understand, and did not even recognize. No longer were the pedestrians well dressed or apparently prosperous. Instead, poverty and squalor and filth were rampant. More loth even than the well-to-do of the suburbs to go within doors, the swarming mass of humanity covered the steps of the houses, and overflowed upon the sidewalk, even upon the street itself. There were men, women, children; the lame, the halt, the blind. The elders stared at the visitor,

while the youngsters, secure in numbers, guyed him to their hearts' content.

It was all as foreign to any previous experience of this countryman as though he had come from a different planet. He had read of the city slums as of Stanley's Central African negro tribes with unpronounceable names; and he had thought of them in much the same way. To him they had been something known to exist, but with which it was but remotely probable he would ever come in contact. Now, without preparation or premeditation, thrown face to face with the reality, it brought upon him a sickening feeling, a sort of mental nausea. Ben was not a philanthropist or a social reformer; the inspiring thought of the inexhaustible field for usefulness therein presented had never occurred to him. He wished chiefly to get away from the stench and ugliness; and, turning down a cross street, he started to return.

The locality he now entered was more modern and better lighted than the one he left behind. The decorated building fronts, with their dazzling electric signs, partook of the characteristics of the inhabitants, who seemed overdressed and vulgarly ostentatious. The gaudily trapped saloons, *cafés*, and music halls, spoke a similar message. This was the recreation spot of the people of the quarter; their land of lethe. So near were the saloons and drinking gardens that from their open doorways there came a pungent odor of beer. Every place had instrumental music of some kind. Mandolins and guitars, in the hands of gentlemen of color, were the favorites. Pianos of execrable tone, played by youths with defective com-

plexions, or by machinery, were a close second. Before one place, a crowd blocked the sidewalk; and there Ben stopped. A vaudeville performance was going on within — an invisible dialect comedian doing a German stunt to the accompaniment of wooden clogs and disarranged verbs. A barker in front, coatless, his collar loosened, a black string tie dangling over an unclean shirt front, was temporarily taking a much-needed rest. An electric sign overhead dyed his cheeks with shifting colors — first red, then green, then white. Despite its veneer of brazen effrontery, the face, with its great mouth and two days' growth of beard, was haggard and weary looking. Ben mentally pictured, with a feeling of compassion, other human beings doing their idiotic "stunts" inside, sweltering in the foul air; and he wondered how, if an atom of self-respect remained in their make-up, they could fail to despise themselves.

But the comedian had subsided in a roar of applause, and again the barker's hands were gesticulating wildly.

"Now 's your time, ladies and gentlemen," he harangued. "It 's continuous, you know, and Madame — "

But Ben did not wait for more. Elbow first, he pushed into the crowd, and as it instantly closed about him the odor of unclean bodies made him fairly hold his breath.

Straight ahead, looking neither to right nor to left, went the countryman; he turned the corner of the block, a corner without a light. Suddenly, with an instinctive tightening of his breath, he drew back. He had nearly stepped upon a man, dead drunk, stretched half in a darkened doorway, half on the walk. The wretch's head

was bent back over one of the iron steps until it seemed as if he must choke, and he was snoring heavily.

Not a policeman was in sight, and Ben, in great physical disgust, carried the helpless hulk to one side, out of the way of pedestrians, took off the tattered coat and rolled it into a pillow for the head, and then moved on with the sound of the stertorous drunken breathing still in his ears.

Still other experiences were in store for him. He made a half block without further interruption ; then he suddenly heard at his back a frightened scream, and a young woman came running toward him, followed at a distance by a roughly dressed man, the latter apparently the worse for liquor. Blair stopped, and the girl coming up, caught him by the arm imploringly.

"Help me, Mister, please!" she pleaded breathlessly. "He — Tom, back there — insulted me. I — " A burst of hysterical tears interrupted the confession.

Meanwhile, seeing the turn events had taken, the pursuer had likewise stopped, and now he hesitated.

"All right," replied Ben. "Go ahead! I'll see that the fellow doesn't trouble you again." And he started back.

But the girl's hand was again upon his arm. "No," she protested, "not that way, please. He's my steady, Tom is, only to-night he's drank too much, and — and — he doesn't realize what he's doing." The grip on his arm tightened as she looked imploringly into his face. "Take me home, please!" A catch was in her voice. "I'm afraid."

Ben hesitated. Even in the half-light the petitioner's face hinted brazenly of cosmetics.

"Where do you live?" he asked shortly.

"Only a little way, less than a block, and it 's the direction you 're going. Please take me!"

"Very well," said Blair, and they moved on, the girl still clinging to him and sobbing at intervals. Before a dark three-story and basement building, with a decidedly sinister aspect, she stopped and indicated a stairway.

"This is the place."

"All right," responded Ben. "I guess you 're safe now. Good-night!"

But she clung to him the tighter. "Come up with me," she insisted. "We 're only on the second floor, and I have n't thanked you yet. Really, I 'm so grateful! You don't know what it means to be a girl, and — and —" Her feelings got the better of her again, and she paused to wipe her eyes on her sleeve. "My mother will be so thankful too. She 'd never forgive me if I did n't bring you up. Please come!" and she led the way up the darkened stair.

Again Ben hesitated. He did not in the least like the situation in which circumstances had placed him. The prospect of the girl's mother, like herself, scattering grateful tears upon him was not alluring; but it seemed the part of a cad to refuse, and at last he followed.

His guide led him up a short flight of stairs and turned to the right, down a dimly lighted hall. The ground-floor of the building was used for store purposes. This second floor was evidently a series of apartments. Lights

from within the rooms crept over the curtained transoms. Voices sounded; glasses clinked. A piano banged out ragtime like mad.

At the fourth door the girl stopped. "Thank you so much for coming," she said. "Walk right in," and throwing open the door she fairly shoved the visitor inside.

From out the semi-darkness, Ben now found himself in a well-lighted room, and the change made him blink about him. Instead of the motherly old lady in a frilled cap, whom he had expected to see, he found himself in the company of a half-dozen coatless young men and under-dressed women, lounging in questionable attitudes on chairs and sofas. At his advent they all looked up. A sallow youth who had been operating the piano turned in his seat and the music stopped. Not yet realizing the trick that had been played upon him, Ben turned to look for his guide; but she was nowhere in sight, and the door was closed. His eyes shifted back and met a circle of amused faces, while a burst of mocking laughter broke upon his ears.

Then for the first time he understood, and his face went white with anger. Without a word he started to leave the room. But one of the women was already at his side, her detaining hand upon his sleeve. "No, no, honey!" she said, insinuatingly. "We 're all good fellows! Stay awhile!"

Ben shook her off roughly. Her very touch was contaminating. But one of the men had had time to get between him and the door; a sarcastic smile was upon his face as he blocked the way.

"I guess it 's on you, old man!" he bantered. "About a half-dozen quarts will do for a starter!" He nodded to a pudgy old woman who was watching interestedly from the background. "You heard the gent's order, mother! Beer, and in a hurry! He looks dry and hot."

Again a gale of laughter broke forth; but Ben took no notice. He made one step forward, until he was within arm's reach of the humorist.

"Step out of my way, please," he said evenly.

Had the man been alone he would have complied, and quickly. No human being with eyes and intelligence could have misread the warning on Ben Blair's countenance. He started to move, when the girl who had first come forward turned the tide.

"Aw, Charley!" she goaded. "Is that all the nerve you 've got!" and she laughed ironically.

Instantly the man's face reddened, and he fell back into his first position.

"Sorry I can't oblige you, pal," he said, "but you see it 's agin de house. Us blokes has got —"

The sentence was never completed. Ben's fist shot out and caught the speaker fair on the point of his jaw, and he collapsed in his tracks. For a second no one in the room stirred; then before Ben could open the door, the other men were upon him. The women fled screaming to the farthest corner of the room, where they huddled together like sheep. Returning with the tray, the old woman realized an only too familiar condition.

"Gentlemen!" she pleaded. "Gentlemen!"

But no one paid the slightest attention to her. Forced

by sheer odds of mass toward a corner, Ben's long arms were working like flails. Another man fell, and was up again. The first one also was upon his feet now, his face white, and a tiny stream of blood trickling from his bruised jaw. A heavy beer-bottle flung by one of the women crashed on the wall over the countryman's head, the contents spattering over him like rain. One of the men had seized a chair and swung it high to strike, with murder in his eye. Attracted by the confusion, the other occupants of the floor had rushed into the hall. The door was flung open and instantly blocked with a mass of sinister menacing faces.

Until then, Ben had been silent as death, silent as one who realizes that he is fighting for life against overwhelming odds. Now of a sudden he leaped backward like a great cat, clear of all the others. From his throat there issued a sound, the like of which not one of those who listened had ever heard before, and which fairly lifted their hair — the Indian war-whoop that the man had learned as a boy. With the old instinctive motion, comparable in swiftness to nothing save the passage of light, the cowboy's hands went to his hips, and as swiftly returned with the muzzles of two great revolvers protruding like elongated index fingers. With equal swiftness, his face had undergone a transformation. His jaw was set and his blue eyes flashed like live coals.

"Stand back, little folks!" he ordered, while the twin weapons revolved in circles of reflected flame about his trigger fingers. "You seem to want a show, and you shall have it!" The whirling circles vanished. A deep

report fell upon the silence, and a gaudy vase on the mantle flew into a thousand pieces. "Stand back, people, or you might get hurt!"

Awed into dumb helplessness, the spectators stared with widening eyes; but the spectacle had only begun. Like the reports of giant fire-crackers, only seconds apart, the great revolvers spoke. A nudely suggestive cast in the corner followed the vase. A quaintly carved clock paused in its measure of time, its hands chronicling the minute of interruption. A decanter of whiskey burst spattering over a table. Two bacchanalian pictures on the wall suddenly had yawning wounds in their centre. The portrait of a queen of the footlights leaped into the air. One of the beer-bottles, which the madame had placed on a convenient table, popped as though it were champagne. Fragments of glass and porcelain fell about like hail. The place was lighted by a tuft of three big incandescent globes; and, last of all, one by one, they crashed into atoms, and the room was in total darkness. Then silence fell, startling in contrast to the late confusion, while the pungent odor of burnt gunpowder intruded upon the nostrils.

For a moment there was inaction; then the assembly broke into motion. No thought was there now of retaliation or revenge; only, as at a sudden conflagration or a wreck, of individual safety and escape. The hallway was cleared as if by magic. Within the room the men and women jostled each other in the darkness, or jammed imprecating in the narrow doorway. In a few seconds Ben was alone. Calmly he thrust the empty revolvers back

into his pockets and followed leisurely into the hall. There the dim light revealed an empty space; but here and there a lock turned gratingly, and from more than one room as he passed came the sound of furniture being hastily drawn forward as a barricade.

No human being ever knew what occurred behind the locked door of Ben Blair's room at the hotel that night. Those hours were buried as deep as what took place in his mind during the months intervening between the coming of Florence Baker to the city and his own decision to follow her. By nature a solitary, he fought his battles alone and in silence. That he never once touched his bed, the hotel maids could have testified the next morning. As to the decision that followed those sleepless hours, his own action gave a clue. He had left a call for an early train West, and at daylight a tap sounded on his door, while a voice announced the time.

"Yes," answered the guest; but he did not stir.

In a few minutes the tap was repeated more insistently. "You've only time to make your train if you hurry," warned the voice.

For a moment Blair did not answer. Then he said: "I have decided not to go."

CHAPTER XXV

OF WHAT AVAIL?

IT was late next morning, almost noon in fact, when Florence Baker awoke; and even then she did not at once rise. A physical listlessness, very unusual to her, lay upon her like a weight. A year ago, by this time of day, she would have been ravenously hungry; but now she had a feeling that she could not have taken a mouthful of food had her life depended on it. The room, although it faced the west and was well ventilated, seemed hot and depressing. A breeze stirred the lace curtains at the window, but it was heated by the blocks of city pavements over which it had come. The girl involuntarily compared this awakening with that of a former life in what now seemed to her the very long ago. She remembered the light morning wind of the prairies, which, always fresh with the coolness of dew and of growing things, had drifted in at the tiny windows of the Baker ranch-house. She recalled the sweet scent of the buffalo grass with a vague sense of depression and irrevocable loss.

She turned restlessly beneath the covers, and in doing so her face came in contact with the moistened surface of her pillow. Propping herself up on her elbow, she looked curiously at the tell-tale bit of linen. Obviously, she had

been crying in her sleep; and for this there must have been a reason. Until that moment she had not thought of the previous night; but now the sudden recollection overwhelmed her. She was only a girl-woman — a child of nature, incapable of repression. Two great tears gathered in her soft brown eyes; with instinctive desire of concealment the fluffy head dropped to the pillow, and the sobs broke out afresh.

Minutes passed; then her mother's hesitating steps approached the door.

"Florence," called a voice. "Florence, are you well?"

The dishevelled brown head lifted, but the girl made no motion to let her mother in.

"Yes — I am well," she echoed.

For a moment Mrs. Baker hesitated, but she was too much in awe of her daughter to enter uninvited.

"I have a note for you," she announced. "Mr. Sidwell's man Alec just brought it. He says there 's to be an answer."

But still the girl did not move. It was an unpropitious time to mention the club-man's name. The fascination of such as he fades at early morning; it demands semi-darkness or artificial light. Just now the thought of him was distinctly depressing, like the sultry breeze that wandered in at the window.

"Very well," said Florence, at last. "Leave it, please, and tell Alec to wait. I 'll be down directly."

In response, an envelope with a monogram in the corner was slipped in under the door, and the bearer's footsteps tapped back into silence.

Slowly the girl crawled from her bed, but she did not at once take up the note. Instead, she walked over to the dresser, and, leaning on its polished top, gazed into the mirror at the reflection of her tear-stained face, with its mass of disarranged hair. It was not a happy face that she saw; and just at this moment it looked much older than it really was. The great brown eyes inspected it critically and relentlessly.

"Florence Baker," she said to the face in the mirror, "you are getting to be old and haggard." A prophetic glimpse of the future came to her suddenly. "A few years more, and you will not be even — good-looking."

She stood a moment longer, then, walking over to the door, she picked up the envelope and tore it open.

"Miss Baker," ran the note, "there is to be an informal little gathering — music, dancing, and a few things cool — at the Country Club this evening. You already know most of the people who will be there. May I call for you? — SIDWELL."

Florence read the missive slowly; then slowly returned it to its cover. There was no need to tell her the meaning of the unwritten message she read between the lines of those few brief sentences. It is only in story-books that human beings do not even suspect the inevitable until it arrives. As well as she knew her own name, she realized that in her answer to that evening's invitation lay the choice of her future life. She was at the turning of the ways — a turning that admitted of no reconsideration. Dividing at her feet, each equally free, were the trails of the natural and the artificial. For a time they kept side

by side; but in the distance they were as separate as the two ends of the earth. By no possibility could both be followed. She must choose between them, and abide by her decision for good or for ill.

As slowly as she had read the note, Florence dressed; and even then she did not leave the room. Bathing her reddened eyes, she drew a chair in front of the window and gazed wistfully down at the handful of green grass, with the unhealthy-looking elm in its centre, which made the Baker lawn. Against her will there came to her a vision of the natural, impersonated in the form of Ben Blair as she had seen him yesterday. Masterful, optimistic, compellingly honest, splendidly vital, with loves and hates like elemental forces of nature, he intruded upon her horizon at every crisis. Try as she would to eliminate him from her life, she could not do it. With a little catch of the breath she remembered that last night, when that man had done — what he did — it was not of what her father or Clarence Sidwell would think, if either of them knew, but of what Ben Blair would think, what he would do, that she most cared. Reluctant as she might be to admit it even to herself, yet in her inner consciousness she knew that this prairie man had a power over her that no other human being would ever have. Still, knowing this, she was deliberately turning away from him. If she accepted that invitation for to-night, with all that it might mean, the separation from Ben would be irrevocable. Once more the brown head dropped into the waiting hands, and the shoulders rocked to and fro in indecision and perplexity.

"God help me!" she pleaded, in the first prayer she had voiced in months. "God help me!"

Again footsteps approached her door, and a hand tapped insistently thereon.

"Florence," said her father's voice. "Are you up?"

The girl lifted her head. "Yes," she answered.

"Let me in, then." The insistence that had been in the knock spoke in the voice. "I wish to speak with you."

Instantly an expression almost of repulsion flashed over the girl's brown face. Never in his life had the Englishman understood his daughter. He was a glaring example of those who cannot catch the psychological secret of human nature in a given situation. From the girl's childhood he had been complaisant when he should have been severe, had stepped in with the parental authority recognized by his race when he should have held aloof.

"Some other time, please," replied Florence. "I don't feel like talking to-day."

Scotty's knuckles met the door-panel with a bang. "But I do feel like it," he responded; "and the inclination is increasing every moment. You would try the patience of Job himself. Come, I'm waiting!" and he shifted from one foot to the other restlessly.

Within the room there was a pause, so long that the Englishman thought he was going to be refused point-blank; then an even voice said, "Come in," and he entered.

He had expected to find Florence defiant and aggressive at the intrusion. If he did not understand this daughter

of his, he at least knew, or thought he knew, a few of her phases. But she had not even risen from her seat, and when he entered she merely turned her head until her eyes met his. Scotty felt his parental dignity vanishing like smoke, — his feelings very like those of a burglar who, invading a similar boudoir, should find the rightful owner at prayer. His first instinct was to beat a retreat, and he stopped uncertainly just within the doorway.

"Well?" questioned Florence, and the pupils of her brown eyes widened.

Scotty flushed, but memory of the impassive Alec waiting below returned, and his anger arose.

"How much longer are you going to keep that negro waiting?" he demanded. "He has been here an hour already by the clock."

A look of almost childlike surprise came over the face of the girl, an expression implying that the other was making a mountain out of a mole-hill. "I really don't know," she said.

Scotty took a chair, and ran his long fingers through his hair perplexedly. "Florence," he said, "at times you are simply maddening; and I do not want to be angry with you. Alec says he is waiting for an answer. What is it an answer to, please? It is my right to know."

Again there was a pause, so long that Scotty expected unqualified refusal: and again he was disappointed. Without a word, the girl removed the note from the envelope and passed it over to him.

Scotty read it and returned the sheet.

"You haven't written an answer yet, I judge?"

"No."

The Englishman's fingers were tapping nervously on the edge of the chair-seat.

"I wish you to decline, then."

The childish expression left the girl's eyes, the listlessness left her attitude.

"Why, if I may ask?" A challenge was in the query.

Scotty arose, and for a half-minute walked back and forth across the disordered room. At last he stopped, facing his daughter.

"The reason, first of all, is that I do not like this man Sidwell in any particular. If you respect my wishes you will have nothing to do with him or with any of his class in future. The second reason is that it is high time some one was watching the kind of affairs you attend." The speaker looked down on the girl sternly. "I think it unnecessary to suggest that neither of us desires a repetition of last night's experience."

Of a sudden, her face very red, Florence was likewise upon her feet. In the irony of circumstances, Sidwell could not have had a more powerful ally. Her decision was instantly formed.

"I quite agree with you about the incident of last evening," she flamed. "As to who shall be my associates, and where I shall go, however, I am of age—" and she started to leave the room.

But preventing, Scotty was between her and the door. "Florence," — his face was very white and his voice trembled, — "we may as well have an understanding now as to defer it. Maybe, as you say, I have no authority over

you longer; but at least I can make a request. You know that I love you, that I would not ask anything which was not for your good. Knowing this, won't you at my request cease going with this man? Won't you refuse his invitation for to-night?"

Nearer than ever before in his life was the Englishman at that moment to grasping the secret of control of this child of many moods. Had he but learned it a few years, even a few months, sooner — But again was the satire of fate manifest, the same irony which, jealously withholding the rewards of labor, keeps the student at his desk, the laborer at his bench, until the worse than useless prizes flutter about like Autumn leaves.

For a moment following Scotty's request there was absolute silence and inaction; then, with a little appealing movement, the girl came close to him.

"Oh, daddy!" she cried. "Dear old daddy! You make it so hard for me! I know you love me, and I do want to do as you wish; I want to be good; but — but" — the brown head was upon Scotty's shoulder, and two soft arms gripped him tight, — "but," the voice was all but choking, "I can't let him go now. It 's too late!"

The driving of his own conveyance was to Sidwell a source of pride. It was therefore no surprise to Florence that at dusk he and his pair of thoroughbreds should appear alone. The girl, very grave, very quiet, had been waiting for him, and was ready almost before he stopped. With a smile of parental pride upon her face, Mollie was

on the porch to say good-bye. At the last moment she approached and kissed her daughter on the cheek. Not in months before had the mother done such a thing as that; and despite herself, as she walked toward the waiting carriage, there came to the girl the thought of another historic kiss, and of a Judas, the betrayer. Once within the narrow single-seated buggy she looked back, hoping against hope; but her father was nowhere in sight.

After the first greeting, neither she nor Sidwell spoke for some minutes. For a time Florence did not even look at her companion. She had a suspicion that he already knew most if not all that had taken place in the Baker home the last day; and the thought tinged her face scarlet. At last she gave a furtive glance at him. He was not looking, and her eyes lingered on his face. It was paler than she had ever seen it before; there were deep circles under the eyes, and he looked nervous and tired; but over it all there was an expression of exaltation that could have but one meaning to her.

"You must let me read it when you get it in shape," she began suddenly.

Sidwell turned blankly. "Read what, please?" he asked.

The girl smiled triumphantly. "The story you have just written. I know by your face it must be good."

The flame of exaltation vanished. The man understood now.

"What if I should refute your theory?" he asked.

"I hardly believe that is possible. I know of nothing else which could make you look like that."

Sidwell hesitated. "There are but few things," he ad-

mitted, "but nevertheless I spoke the truth. It was one of them this time."

Florence smiled interestedly. "I am very curious," she suggested.

The brown eyes and the black met steadily. "Very well, then," said the man, "I'll tell you. The reason was, because I have with me the handsomest girl in the whole city."

Instantly the brown eyes dropped; the face reddened, but not with the flush of pleasure. Florence was not yet sufficiently artificial for such empty compliment.

"I'd rather you wouldn't say such things," she said simply. "They hurt me."

"But not when they're true," he persisted.

There was no answer, and they drove on again in silence; the tap of the thoroughbreds' feet on the asphalt sounding regular as the rattle of a snare-drum, the rows of houses at either side running past like the shifting scenes of a panorama. They passed numbers of other carriages, and to the occupants of several Sidwell lifted his hat. Each as he did so glanced at his companion curiously. The man was far too well known to have his actions pass without gossip. At last they reached a semblance of the open country, and a few minutes later Sidwell pointed out the row of lights on the broad veranda of the big one-story clubhouse. The affair had begun in the afternoon with a golf tournament, and when the two drove up and Sidwell turned over his trotters to a man in waiting, the entertainment was in full blast, although the hour was still early.

The building itself, ordinarily ample for the organization's rather exclusive membership, was fairly crowded on this occasion. The club-house had been given up to the orchestra and dancers, and refreshments were being served on the lawn and under the adjoining trees. Even the veranda had been cleared of chairs.

As Sidwell and his companion approached the place, he said in an undertone, "Let 's not get in the crush yet; if we do, we won't escape all the evening." His dark eyes looked into his companion's face meaningly. "I have something I wish especially to say to you."

Florence did not meet his eyes, but she well knew the message therein. She nodded assent to the request.

Making a detour, they emerged into the park, and strolled back to a place where, seeing, they themselves could not be seen. Sidwell found a bench, and they sat down side by side. The girl offered no suggestion, no protest. Since that row of lights had appeared in the distance she had become passive. She knew beforehand all that was to take place; something that she had decided to accede to, the details of which were unimportant. An apathy which she did not attempt to explain held her. The music heard so near, the glimpses of shifting, faultlessly dressed figures, the loveliness of a perfect night — things that ordinarily would have been intensely exhilarating — now passed by her unnoticed. Her senses were temporarily in lethargy. If she had a conscious wish, it was that the inevitable would come, and be over with.

From without this land of unreality she was suddenly conscious of a voice speaking to her. "Florence," it

said, "Florence Baker, you know before I say a word the thing I wish to tell you, the question I wish to ask. You know, because more than once I've tried to speak, and at the last moment you have prevented. But you can't stop me to-night. We have run on understanding each other long enough; too long. I have never lied to you yet, Florence, and I am not going to begin now. I will not even analyze the feeling I have for you, or call it by name. I know this is an unheard-of-way to talk to a girl, especially one so impressionable as you; but I cannot help it. There is something about you, Florence, that keeps me from untruth, when probably under the same circumstances I would lie to any other woman in the world. I simply know that you impersonate a desire of my nature ungratified; that without you I have no wish to live."

Strange and cold-blooded as this proposal would have seemed to a listener, Florence heard it without a sign. It did not even affect her with the shock of the unexpected. It was merely a part of that inevitable something she had anticipated, and had for months watched slowly taking form.

"I suppose it seems unaccountable to you," the voice went on, "that I should have been attracted to you in the first place. It has often been so to me, and I've tried to explain it. Beautiful, you undeniably are, Florence; but I do not believe it was that. It was, I think, because, despite your ideals of something which — pardon me — does n't exist, you were absolutely natural; and the women I'd met before were the reverse of that. Like myself, they had tasted of life and found it flat. I danced with

them, drank with them, went the round of so-called gayety with them; but they repelled me. But you, Florence, are very different. You make me think of a prairie anemone with the dew on its petals. I have n't much to offer you save money, which you already have in plenty, and an empty fame; but I 'll play the game fair. I 'll take you anywhere in the world, do anything you wish." Out of the shadow an arm crept around the girl's waist, closed there, and she did not stir. "I am writing an English story now, and the principal character, a soldier, has been ordered to India. To catch the atmosphere, I 've got to be on the spot. The boat I wish to take will leave in ten days. Will you go with me as my wife?"

The voice paused, and the face so near her own remained motionless, waiting. Into the pause crept the music of the orchestra — beat, beat, beat, like the throbbing of a mighty heart. Above it, distinct for an instant, sounded the tinkle of a woman's laugh; then again silence. It was now the girl's turn to speak, to answer; but not a sound left her lips. She had an odd feeling that she was playing a game of checkers, and that it was her turn to play. "Move!" said an inward monitor. "Move! move!" But she knew not where or how.

The man's arm tightened around her; his lips touched hers again and again; and although she was conscious of the fact, it carried no particular significance. It all seemed a part of the scene that was going on in which she was a silent actor — of the game in which she was a player.

"Florence," said an insistent voice, "Florence, Florence

Baker! Don't sit like that! For God's sake, speak to me, answer me!"

This time the figure stirred, the head drooped in assent.

"Yes," she said.

Again the circling arm tightened, and the man's lips touched her own, again and again. The very repetition aroused her.

"And you will sail with me in ten days?"

Fully awake was Florence Baker now, fully conscious of all that had happened and was happening.

"Yes," she said. "The sooner the better. I want to have it over with." A moment longer she sat still as death; then suddenly the mood of apathy departed, and in infinite weakness, infinite pathos, the dark head buried itself on the man's shoulder. "Promise me," she pleaded brokenly, "that you will be kind to me! Promise me that you always will be kind!"

CHAPTER XXVI

LOVE'S SURRENDER

SCOTTY BAKER was not an adept at concealing his emotions, and he stared in unqualified surprise at the long figure in brown which of a sudden intruded into his range of vision. The morning paper upon his knees fluttered unnoticed to the floor of the porch.

"Ben Blair, by all that's good and proper!" he exclaimed to the man who, without a look to either side, turned up the short walk. "Where in heaven's name did you come from? I supposed you'd gone home a week ago."

Blair stopped at the steps, and deliberately wiped the perspiration from his face.

"You were misinformed about my going," he explained. "I changed hotels, that was all."

Scotty stared harder than before.

"But why?" he groped. "I inquired of the clerk, and he said you had gone by an afternoon train. I don't see —"

Ben mounted the steps and took a chair opposite the Englishman.

"If you will excuse me," he said, "I would rather not go into details. The fact's enough — I am still here.

Besides — pardon me — I did not call to be questioned, but to question. You remember the last time I saw you?"

Scotty nodded an affirmative. He had a premonition that the unexpected was about to happen.

"Yes," he said.

Ben lit a cigar. "You remember, then, that you made me a certain promise?"

Scotty threw one leg over the other restlessly. "Yes, I remember," he repeated.

The visitor eyed him keenly. "I would like to know if you kept it," he said.

Scotty felt the seat of his chair growing even more uncomfortable than before, and he cast about for an avenue of escape. One presented itself.

"Is that what you stayed to find out?" he questioned in his turn.

Ben blew out a cloud of smoke, and then another.

"No, not the main reason. But that has nothing to do with the subject. I have a right to ask the question. Did you or did you not keep your promise?"

The Englishman's first impulse was to refuse point-blank to answer; then, on second thought, he decided that such a course would be unwise. The other really did have a right to ask.

"I —" he hesitated, "decided —"

But interrupting, Ben raised his hand, palm outward.

"Don't dodge the question. Yes or no?"

Scotty hesitated again, and his face grew red.

"No," he said.

The visitor's hand, fingers outspread, returned to his knee.

"Thank you. I have one more question to ask. Do you intend, without trying to prevent it, to let your daughter throw away her every chance of future happiness? Are you, Florence's father, going to let her marry Sidwell?"

With one motion Scotty was on his feet. The eyes behind the thick lenses fairly flashed.

"You are insulting, sir," he blazed. "I can stand much from you, Ben Blair, but this interference in my family affairs I cannot overlook. I request you to leave my premises!"

Blair did not stir. His face remained as impassive as before.

"Your pardon again," he said steadily, "but I refuse. I did not come to quarrel with you, and I won't; but we will have an understanding — now. Sit down, please."

The Englishman stared, almost with open mouth. Had any one told him he would be coerced in this way within his own home he would have called that person mad; nevertheless, the first flash of anger over, he said no more.

"Sit down, please," repeated Ben; and this time, without a word or a protest, he was obeyed.

Ben straightened in his seat, then leaned forward. "Mr. Baker," he said, "you do not doubt that I love Florence — that I wish nothing but her good?"

Scotty nodded a reluctant assent.

"No; I don't doubt you, Ben," he said.

The thin face of the younger man leaned forward and grew more intense.

"You know what Sidwell is — what the result will be if Florence marries him?"

Scotty's head dropped into his hands. He knew what was coming.

"Yes, I know," he admitted.

Ben paused, and had the other been looking he would have seen that his ordinarily passive face was working in a way which no one would have thought possible.

"In heaven's name, then," he said, slowly, "why do you allow it? Have you forgotten that it is only three days until the date set? God! man, you must be sleeping! It is ghastly — even the thought of it!"

Surprised out of himself, Scotty looked up. The intensity of the appeal was a thing to put life into a figure of clay. For an instant he felt the stimulant, felt his blood quicken at the suggestion of action; then his impotence returned.

"I have tried, Ben," he explained weakly, "but I can do nothing. If I attempted to interfere it would only make matters worse. Florence is as completely out of my control as —" he paused for a simile — "as the sunshine. I missed my opportunity with her when she was young. She has always had her own way, and she will have it now. It is the same as when she decided to come to town. She controls me, not I her."

Blair settled back in his chair. The mask of impassivity dropped back over his face, not again to lift. He was again in command of himself.

"You expect to do nothing more, then?" he asked finally.

Scotty did not look up. "No," he responded. "I can do nothing more. She will have to find out her mistake for herself."

Ben regarded the older man steadily. It would have been difficult to express that look in words.

"You 'd be willing to help, would you," he suggested, "if you saw a way?"

The Englishman's eyes lifted. Even the incredible took on an air of possibility in the hands of this strong-willed ranchman.

"Yes," he repeated. "I will gladly do anything I can."

For half a minute Ben Blair did not speak. Not a nerve twitched or a muscle stirred in his long body; then he stood up, the broad sinewy shoulders squared, the masterful chin lifted.

"Very well," he said. "Call a carriage, and be ready to leave town in half an hour."

Scotty blinked helplessly. The necessity of sudden action always threw him into confusion. His mind needed not minutes but days to adjust itself to the unpremeditated.

"Why?" he queried. "What do you intend doing?"

But Ben did not stop to explain. Already he was at the door of the vestibule. "Don't ask me now. Do as I say, and you 'll see!" And he stepped inside.

Within the entrance, he paused for a moment. He had never been in any room of the house except the library

adjoining; and after a few seconds, walking over, he tapped twice on the door.

There was no answer, and he stepped inside. The place was empty, but, listening from the dining-room on the left he heard the low intermittent murmur of voices in conversation and the occasional click of china. Sliding doors connected the rooms, and again for an instant he hesitated. Then, pulling them apart, he stood fairly in the aperture.

As he had expected, Florence and her mother were at breakfast. The doors had slid noiselessly, and for an instant neither observed him. Florence was nearest, half-facing him, and she was the first to glance up. As she did so, the coffee-cup in her hand shook spasmodically and a great brown blotch spread over the white tablecloth. Simultaneously her eyes widened, her cheeks blanched, and she stared as at a ghost. Her mother, too, turned at the spectacle, and her color shifted to an ashen gray.

For some seconds not one of the three spoke or stirred. It was Mrs. Baker who first arose and advanced toward the intruder, as threateningly as it was possible for her to do.

"Who, if I might ask, invited you to come this way?" she challenged.

Ben took one step inside the room and folded his arms.

"I came without being asked," he explained evenly.

Mollie's weak oval face stiffened. She felt instinctively that her chiefest desires were in supreme menace. But one defense suggested itself — to be rid of the intruder at once.

"I trust, then, you are enough of a gentleman to return the way you came," she said icily.

Ben did not even glance at her. He was looking at the dainty little figure still motionless at the table.

"If that is the mark of a gentleman, I am not one," he answered.

The mother's face flamed. Like Scotty, her brain moved slowly, and on the spur of the moment inadequate insult alone answered her call.

"I might have expected such a remark from a cowman!" she burst forth.

Instantly Florence was upon her feet; but Ben Blair gave no indication that he had heard. His arms still folded, he took two steps nearer the girl, then stopped.

"Florence," he said steadily, "I have just seen your father. We three — he, you, and I — are going back home, back to the prairies. Our train leaves at eleven o'clock. The carriage will be here in half an hour. You have plenty of time if you hurry."

Again there was silence. Once more it was the mother who spoke first.

"You must be mad, both of you!" she cried. "Florence is to be married in three days, and it would take two to go each way. You must be mad!"

It was the girl's turn to grow pale. She began to understand.

"You say you and papa evolved this programme?" she said sarcastically. "What part, pray, did he take?"

Blair was as impassive as before.

"I suggested it, and your father acquiesced."

"And the third party, myself —" The girl's eyes were very bright.

"I undertook the task of having you ready when the carriage comes."

One of Florence's brown hands grasped the back of the chair before her.

"I trust you did not underestimate the difficulty," she commented ironically. "Otherwise you might be disappointed."

Ben said nothing. He did not even stir.

Another group of seconds were gathered into the past. The inactivity tugged at the girl's nerves.

"By the way," she asked, "where are we going to stay when we arrive, and for how long?"

"You are to be my guests," answered Blair. "As to the length of time, nothing has been arranged."

Florence made one more effort to consider the affair lightly.

"You speak with a good deal of assurance," she commented. "Did it never occur to you that at this particular time I might decide not to go?"

Ben returned her look.

"No," he said.

Beneath the trim brown figure one foot was nervously tapping the floor.

"In other words, you expect to take me against my will, —by physical force?"

"No." Ben again spoke deliberately. "You will come of your own choice."

"And leave Mr. Sidwell?"

"Yes."

"Without an explanation?"

"None will be necessary, I think. The fact itself will be enough."

"And never — marry him?"

"And never marry him."

"You think he would not follow?"

"I know he would not!"

There was a pause in the swift passage of words. The girl's breath was coming with difficulty. The spell of this indomitable rancher was settling upon her.

"You really imagine I will do such an unheard-of thing?" she asked slowly.

"I imagine nothing," he answered quickly. "I know."

It was the crisis, and into it Mollie intruded with clumsy tread. "Florence," she urged, "Florence, don't listen to him any longer. He must be intoxicated. Come with me!" and she started to drag the girl away.

Without a word, Ben Blair walked across to the door leading into the room beyond, and stood with his hand on the knob.

"Mrs. Baker," he said slowly, "I thought I would not speak an unkind word to-day, no matter what was said to me; but you have offended too often." His glance took in the indolently shapeless figure from head to toe, and back again until he met her eye to eye. "You are the personification of cowardice, of selfishness and snobbery, that makes one despise his kind. For mere personal vanity you would sacrifice your own daughter — your own flesh and blood. Probably we shall never meet again; but if

we should, do not dare to speak to me. Do not speak to me now!" He swung open the door, and indicated the passage with a nod of his head. "Go," he said, "and if you are a Christian, pray for a better heart — for forgiveness!"

The woman hesitated; her lips moved, but she was dumb. She wanted to refuse, but the irresistible power in those relentless blue eyes compelled her to obey. Without a word she left the room and closed the door behind her.

Ben Blair came back. The girl had not moved.

"Florence," he said, "there are but twenty minutes left. I ask you again to get ready."

The girl's color rose anew; her blood flowed tumultuously, until she could feel the beating of the pulses at her wrists.

"Ben Blair," she challenged, "you are trying to prevent my marrying another man! Is it not so?"

The rancher folded his arms again.

"I *am* preventing it," he said.

Florence's brown eyes blazed. She clasped her hands together until the fingers were white.

"You admit it, then!" she cried, looking at her companion steadily, a world of scorn in her face. "I never thought such a thing possible — that you would let your jealousy get the better of you like this!" She paused, and hurled the taunt she knew would hurt him most. "You are the last person on earth I would have selected to become a dog in the manger!"

Ben did not stir, although the brown of his sun-tanned face went white.

"I looked for that," he said simply.

Florence's brown eyes widened in wonder — and in something more — something she did not understand. Her heart was beating more wildly than before. She felt her self-control slipping from her grasp, like a rope through her hands.

"There seems nothing more to be said, then," she said, "except that I will not go."

Even yet Blair did not move.

"You will go. The carriage comes in ten minutes," he reiterated calmly.

The small figure stiffened, the dainty chin tilted in the air.

"I defy you to tell me how you can force me to go!"

It was the supreme moment, but Benjamin Blair showed no trace of excitement or of passion. His folded arms remained passive across his chest.

"Florence Baker, did I ever lie to you?"

The girl's lip trembled. She knew now what to expect.

"No," she said.

"You are quite sure?"

"Yes, I am quite sure."

"Did I ever say I would do anything that I did not do?"

The girl had an all but irrepressible desire to cry out, to cover her face like a child. A flash of anger at her inability to maintain her self-control swept over her.

"No," she admitted. "I never knew you to break your word."

"Very well, then," still no haste, no anger, — only the

relentless calm which was infinitely more terrible than either. "I will tell you why of your own choice you will go with me. It is because you value the life of Clarence Sidwell; because, as surely as I have not lied to you or to any human being in the past, there is no power on earth that can otherwise keep me away from him an hour longer."

Realization came instantaneously to Florence Baker and blotted out self-consciousness. The nervous tension vanished as fog before the sun.

"You would not do it," she said, very steadily. "You could not do it!"

Ben Blair said not a word.

"You could not," repeated the girl swiftly; "could not, because you — love me!"

One of the man's hands loosened in an unconscious gesture.

"Don't repeat that, please, or trust in it," he answered. "You misled me once, but you can't mislead me again. It is because I love you that I will do what I said."

There was but one weapon in the arsenal adequate to meet the emergency. With a sudden motion, the girl came close to him.

"Ben, Ben Blair," her arms flashed around the man's neck, the brown eyes — moist, sparkling — were turned to his face, "promise me you will not do it." The dainty throat swelled and receded with her short quick breaths. "Promise me! Please promise me!"

For a second the rancher did not stir; then, very gently, he freed himself and moved a step backward.

"Florence," he said slowly, "you do not know me even yet." He drew out his big old-fashioned silver watch, once Rankin's. "You still have four minutes to get ready — no more, no less."

Silence like that of a death-chamber fell over the bright little dining-room. From the outside came the sound of Mollie's step as she moved back and forth, back and forth, but dared not enter. A boy was clipping the lawn, and the muffled purr of the mower, accompanied by the bit of popular ragtime he was whistling, stole into the room.

Suddenly a carriage drove up in front of the house, and leaping from his seat the driver stood waiting. The door of the vestibule opened, and Scotty himself stepped uncertainly within. At the library entrance he halted, but the odor of the black cigar he was smoking was wafted in.

Through it all, neither of the two in that room had stirred. It would have been impossible to tell what Ben Blair was thinking. His eyes never left the watch in his hand. During the first minute the girl had not looked at her companion. Unappeasable anger seemed personified in her. For half of the next minute she still stood impassive; then she glanced up almost surreptitiously. For the long third minute the eyes held where they had lifted, and slowly over the soft brown face, taking the place of the former expression, came a look that was not of anger or of hatred, not even of dislike, but of something the reverse, something all but unbelievable. Her dark eyes softened. A choking lump came into her throat; and still, in seeming paradox, she was of a sudden happier than at any time she could remember.

Before the last minute was up, before Ben Blair had replaced the watch, she was in the adjoining room saying good-bye to Mollie hurriedly; saying something more, — a thing that fairly took the mother's breath.

"Florence Baker!" she gasped, "you shall not do it! If you do, I will disown you! I will never forgive you — never! never!"

But, unheeding, the girl was already back, and looking into Ben's face. Her eyes were very bright, and there was about her a suppressed excitement that the other did not clearly understand.

"I am ready," she said, "on one condition."

Blair's blue eyes looked a question. In any other mood he would have recognized Florence, but this strange person he hardly seemed to know.

"I am listening," he said.

The girl hesitated, the rosy color mounting to her cheeks. Decision of action was far easier than expression.

"I will go with you," she faltered, "but alone."

A suggestion of the flame on the other's face sprang to the man's also.

"I think, under the circumstances," he stammered, "it would be better to have your father go too."

The dainty brown figure stiffened.

"Very well, then — I will not go!"

The man stood for a moment immovable, with unshifting eyes, like a figure in clay; then, turning, without a word, he started to leave the room. He had almost reached the door, when he heard a voice behind him.

"Ben Blair," it said insistently, "Ben Blair!"

He paused, glanced back, and could scarcely believe his eyes. The girl was coming toward him; but it was a Florence he had not previously known. Her face was rosier than before, red to her very ears and to the waves of her hair. Her chin was held high, and beneath the thin brown skin of the throat the veins were athrob.

"Ben Blair," she repeated intensely, "Ben Blair, can't you understand what I meant? Must I put it into words?" The soft brown eyes were looking at him frankly. "Oh, you are blind, blind!"

For a second, like the lull before the thunderclap, the man did not move; then of a sudden he grasped the girl by the shoulders, and held her at arm's length.

"Florence," he cried, "are you playing with me?"

She spoke no word, but her gaze held his unfalteringly.

Minutes passed, but still the man could not believe the testimony of his eyes. The confession was too unexpected, too incredible. Unconsciously the grip of his hands tightened.

"Am I — mad?" he gasped. "You care for me — you are willing to go — because you love me?"

Even yet the girl did not answer; but no human being could longer question the expression on her face. Ben Blair could not doubt it, and the reflection of love glowing in the tear-wet eyes flashed into his own. The past, with all that it had held, vanished like the memory of an unpleasant dream. The present, the vital throbbing present, alone remained. Suddenly the tense arms relaxed. Another second, and the brown head was upon his shoulder.

"Florence," he cried passionately, "Florence, Florence!"

He could say no more, only repeat over and over her dear name.

"Ben," sobbed the girl, "Ben! Ben!" An interrupting memory drew her to him closer and closer. "I loved you all the time!—loved you!—and yet I so nearly—can you ever forgive me?"

Wondering at the prolonged silence, Scotty came hesitatingly into the library, peered in at the open doorway, and stood transfixed.

THE END

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